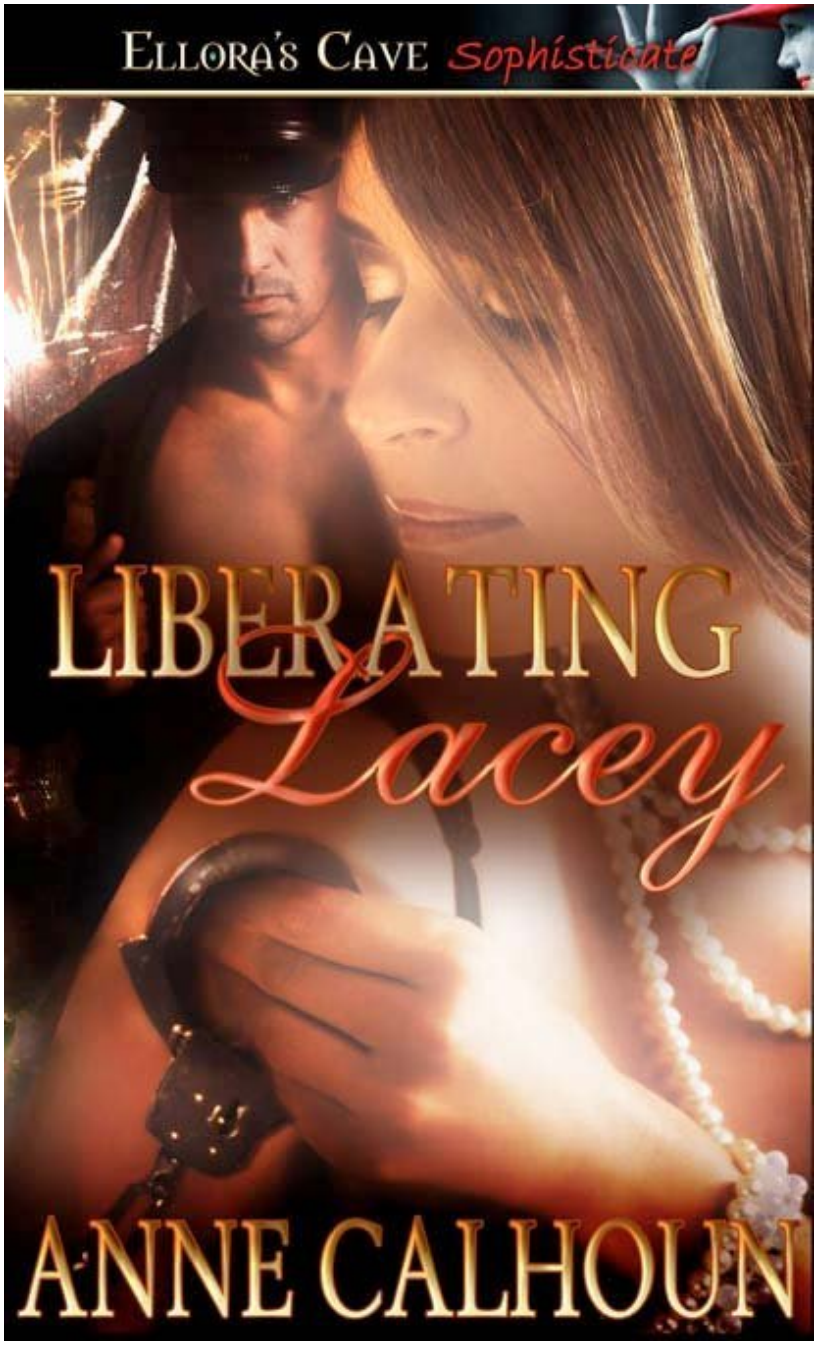
Ellora's Cave Sophisticate
LIBERATING
Lacey
ANNE CALHOUN

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication

www.ellorascave.com

Liberating Lacey

ISBN 9781419920486

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Edited by Meghan Conrad

Photography and cover art by Les Byerley

Electronic book Publication May 2009

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LIBERATING LACEY

Anne Calhoun

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Dedication

With everlasting gratitude to the members of Prairieland Romance Writers. Special thanks goes to Robin ll. Rotham, for reading, recommending and lunches at Applebees; and B, who loves Hunter as much as I do and called me out when I was holding back.

Thank you for helping me make this book the best it could be!

Undying thanks (and a supply of sock yarn) to my editor, Meghan Conrad, who gave me the time the story needed. Hugs to two friends worth their weight in gold—

Kristi, who reads everything, and Liz, who said, “Of course you’re a writer!” when I didn’t think I was or ever would be.

Finally, I can never repay the debt of gratitude I owe to the men in my life. Lacey finds happiness in being loved just as she is. I dedicate this book to two people who give me the same joy—my husband and son.

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Chapter One

She didn't belong here.

Distractingly arrhythmic strobe lights flashed in Lacey Meyers' eyes as she looked around the unfamiliar nightclub. Near the end of the bar, a pack of boisterous young men parted for a woman wearing sultry make-up and a black dress as sleek and short as her spiky hair. She offered a flirtatious nod of thanks as she strutted up to the bar to order a drink. The player with the courage to step up and pay for the drink, however, got a come-hither smile that left no doubt of her gratitude. Her breasts artfully framed by the opening in her zip-front dress, the woman spoke a few words to her attentive new friend while Lacey sipped her Chardonnay to disguise her interest. She hadn't been that bold, or that confident, even when she was that young.

She'd chosen Buff for her first outing to a nightclub because a recent poll of newspaper readers awarded the trendy bar-slash-dance club first prize for "Best Place to Meet Someone New". She desperately needed to meet someone new. *Different.* Her few post-divorce dates had all been with friends or acquaintances, mostly men she'd had over to the house for the large cocktail parties orchestrated to help her ex-husband, Davis, make partner in his law firm.

The same men, the same restaurants, the same conversations…the same physical reactions, or lack thereof. Definitely time for someone *different*, a sentiment she hoped a man in this bar shared, because she surely didn't belong here.

This isn't an anthropological study, Lace. Stop observing and start interacting.

The words of her best friend, Claire, echoed in her mind. Unlike Lacey, Claire had been determinedly single until her thirty-third birthday, when her biological clock went off. In short order, she fell

in love, married and had two children in two years. Prior to her tumble into domesticity Claire spent her weekends drinking, dancing and sleeping with whoever caught her eye. Lacey married Davis, her college sweetheart and only lover, at twenty-one. Best friends since kindergarten, she'd vicariously lived Claire's single-girl lifestyle through Sunday brunches, phone calls and texting and felt not the slightest twinge of envy.

Now Claire mothered a colicky newborn and a jealous toddler, while Lacey, single after fifteen years, was suddenly faced with the road not taken. She'd never met a stranger in a bar and taken him home. While married, she didn't regret walking the straight and narrow, but now…now she wanted the experience.

Just once.

"'Scuse me."

She flicked a glance over her shoulder and saw a broad expanse of chest testing the seams of a black t-shirt before her gaze flashed up to close-cropped dark brown hair, green eyes, angular cheekbones and a mouth set in a firm line. Off-balance in her spike heels, Lacey moved to her right to let the man up to the bar, but he moved the same way.

"I'm sorry," she said, apologizing automatically as she moved to the left at the same time he did. So close she could feel the heat of his body radiating against her naked back, he put his hands on the exposed skin just above the low-cut, hip hugging waistband of her skinny jeans. An electric shock coursed through her and she gasped.

Hello, different.

Without a word, he shifted her back to the right, then slid to her left to lean against the bar. Heart pounding, her cheeks flushed from the brief contact, Lacey watched out of the corner of her eye as he gave a sharp nod to obtain the bartender's attention, then

ordered a Sam Adams.

A surreptitious glance at his left hand showed a bare ring finger, but surely a man who could generate an electric current with one touch was taken, out with his girlfriend for a night of drinking and dancing, even meeting someone for a first date.

Disappointed, she treated herself to a long look as he paid for the drink, then tipped back his beer bottle. As he swallowed, the muscles in his throat contracted smoothly under a dark five o'clock shadow. Surrounded by suits on weekdays and business casual on weekends, she couldn't take her gaze from the breadth of his shoulders and the bunch and release of sculpted muscles in his arms. His jeans-clad hips shifted enticingly as he propped a scuffed black motorcycle boot on the brass rail under the bar.

To her surprise, he leaned toward her. "Like what you see?" he asked.

Healthy male musk under the scent of a clean, woodsy cologne remained when he moved back, his green eyes assessing as he waited for her reaction. Despite the potentially cocky words, she didn't sense arrogance behind them, but rather a challenge. *Babe in the woods* and *swimming with sharks* were Claire's favorite phrases for Lacey's plan to get a taste of what she'd been missing all these years, but this man had a presence that made her body sit up and take notice. For him, she'd risk a bite or two.

"Yes," she said, putting into her smile some of the confidence that served her so well in the cutthroat brokerage world. "But you must hear that all the time."

"Not from a woman like you," he said and tipped back his beer bottle again.

Could be a compliment, could be an evasion. "Which means?" He took her innocent question as an invitation to return her appraisal, his eyes sliding over her with a thoroughness now equal parts evaluation and interest. The swell of her breasts under her backless green silk halter top, the curve of her hips and the length of her legs all received the same heated look. Her nipples tightened in

response.

She watched his face as he looked her over head to toe and back up again, so she didn't miss his pause at the now visible buds thrusting against her top. She must have passed inspection, because his forest green eyes now held only unapologetic, frank interest.

"You're not like all the other girls in here," he said, his voice just a little rougher.

And here they were, already at the deal breaker. "That's because I'm older than any other woman in this bar." Ten minutes of observation made that clear, so there was no point in lying about her age.

He pursed his lips. "Early thirties?"

She smiled, suspecting politeness rather than accuracy in his guess, as he didn't seem to miss much. "You're very kind, but I'm thirty-six. And you're…late twenties?" His stern expression and the stubble led her to believe he might be about her age, but with closer inspection she was mentally revising her estimate…in the wrong direction. *Please, please, let him be at least thirty. Mid-thirties would be better. Mid-thirties would feel less awkward.*

"Twenty-eight," he said.

Oh dear God.

"I'm still thirty-six," she said, not bothering to explain that her birthday was just two weeks before, because she fully expected him to push away from the bar with a casual "See ya" and disappear into the Saturday night throng.

"I'm Hunter," he said, surprising her.

"Lacey," she replied and held out her hand.

He shook it with a firm, calloused grip, then said, “What brings you to Buff, Lacey?”

There was no point in wasting his time if he laughed at the thought of doing more than talking to a woman closer to forty than thirty. She tucked her hair behind her ear and said, “I’m looking for someone to take home.”

“What’s a class act like you doing here, looking to hook up?” He asked his questions like he expected to be answered, with a hint of suggestiveness under the matter-of-fact tone.

This was not good. Surely barely-there jeans and half a top masked twelve years of private school and a classics degree from a women’s college. “Class act?”

“Honey, you can’t hide class under those fuck-me clothes,” he said.

She finished her wine in an effort to hide her chagrin. “I’m new to this kind of place, this *scene*,” she admitted. “I didn’t think anyone would look beyond the clothes.”

“It’s the way you hold yourself,” he said. “Straight back, direct gaze to cover the nerves. You’re checking things out, seeing how they work, getting a feel for the scene, but you’re not desperate. Some women come in here and make fools out of themselves trying to score a guy. Any guy. You know exactly what you want and you’ll go home alone if you don’t find it.”

Sixteen years of private education kept her jaw from dropping, but only just. “You give me more credit than I deserve.”

He gave her a knowing look. “I’m not that far off. Lawyer?” he asked as he signaled the bartender for a second glass of wine for her.

“Commercial mortgage broker,” she said absently. “What do you do

that makes you so observant?"

"I'm a cop."

Her eyes swept over his body again, taking in the way he held his ground at the bar without effort. Heat spread through her as she flashed back to his firm grip, how he easily controlled her body.

"Thank you," she said when the bartender set the glass of wine in front of her.

"That must be an interesting job."

"Ninety-five percent routine, five percent pure adrenaline rush," he replied.

"You don't shoot people regularly like television cops?"

"Too much paperwork," he said.

His off-hand delivery startled a laugh out of her. "Of course, the paperwork," she agreed with an arch smile and earned herself a slight lift at the corners of his mouth.

"So, Lacey, what are you looking for in a hook-up?" This was familiar, the negotiations dance. The trick was to know when to reveal your hand and when to hold back. Against all odds, this extremely fine man was hanging around when the bar was full of younger, more flirtatious women. If he'd checked out every woman who walked by, she'd know he was just marking time until a better prospect came along, but his gaze was all over her, striking sparks with each quick glance.

Time to lay her cards on the table. She copied his attentive stance, leaning in to speak into his ear rather than shouting over the driving beat of dance music. "Someone who can show me what I've been missing for the last decade. I'm recently divorced and spent my marriage having sex in the missionary position once a week. I want to broaden my horizons."

He pulled back and looked at her, his green eyes slumberous. "What do you have against the missionary position? It's one of my

favorites." She frowned, refusing to get distracted by *one of his favorites*. "Oh? Why is that?" It was his turn to lean in. Each warm breath riffled the hair at her temple and tantalizing heat radiated from his body. "Because there's nothing like the feel of a woman's body under mine, all tight and hot and wet as she slowly comes apart." In fifteen years of marriage, not once had she ever "slowly come apart" under her husband. She stared at him as her heart knocked hard against her ribs, stopped for a moment, then restarted at a rabbit's pace. His eyes, moss-dark and blatantly sensual now, held her gaze with a bold challenge and she couldn't look away.

"But you don't want missionary, so we'll think of something else. What *do* you want?"

Words failed her. Hunter's assessment of her standards was dead-on. She knew exactly what she wanted— *him*—but she simply couldn't articulate the unfamiliar ache throbbing just below the button of her jeans.

Hunter's eyebrows lifted almost imperceptibly. "Come on," he said. "Let's dance."

"I haven't danced in ages," she said with a panicked glance at the dance floor. That was a fib. She'd never danced in a club and years of ballet lessons didn't provide adequate training for the current hip-hop moves.

"It's like riding a bike. You'll be fine," he said. Without waiting for an answer he left his half-full bottle of beer on the bar and took her hand. The firm grip of his fingers, warm and dry and calloused around the sensitive edge of her hand, felt remarkably possessive for someone she'd met less than thirty minutes before.

He led her to the packed dance floor, finding space in the far, back corner. All around them, couples danced with or at each other, the slow, driving beat of the song inspiring downright dirty gyrations.

Hesitant and awkward on her higher-than-usual heels, she stepped close to him to avoid other dancers and lifted her hands, then stopped, unsure where to put them. He slid his knee between hers and set both hands on her hips, his long fingers almost meeting at the back seam of her jeans, his thumbs pressing into the soft, bare skin of her exposed hipbones. His confident move solved the problem of what to do with her hands. They naturally curved around his neck, her fingers brushing the bristly edge of his hair.

Between the heels and the unexpected shock of being so close to a man other than her ex-husband, she felt a little off-balance, but for the first song they simply rocked to the steady beat, nothing fancy, nothing overtly sexual or provocative. He kept an inch or two of space between their pelvises, one hand on her hip, the other resting on the middle of her bare back. She gained confidence in her balance and took her gaze off his broad chest, her eyes flickering up to catch him staring at her parted lips. When he met her gaze, the stark male intent in his look stroked over her skin as physically as the rhythmic caress of his thumb at her waist.

She wasn't the only feeling the connection between them.

With increasing frequency, her zipper made fleeting contact with his hipbone, a tantalizing pressure echoed when her own hip brushed against his solid erection. They were dancing, yes, but by the time the third song blended seamlessly into the fourth, he'd brought her closer, pelvis to pelvis, his strong thigh between her legs, her unrestrained breasts swaying against his hard chest. The motion teased the tips into aching points and the silk that felt so smooth and fine at home became a subtle torture device. She arched against him, seeking relief for the need throbbing inside her, but when she pulled away the chafing resumed, redoubling the ache.

If he'd intended for the dance to seduce her, it was working. This was foreplay, amazing, prolonged, heated foreplay, the brush of his thigh between hers, the rock and retreat of their hips, looking up into his eyes. He kept his hands well within the bounds 10

of propriety but supported her weight, using his body with a deft sense of balance and awareness that left her slick and soft. Ready.

“See? Just like riding a bike,” he said, his words a velvet rumble in her ear calling her back from some primitive place.

Forget about observation. She’d gone native.

“Something like that,” she agreed. It was actually sex standing up, but she had no interest in arguing the point with him when her mouth was dry, the ache consuming her. She slid her hands over his chest, along his ribs and into the back pockets of his jeans to press herself against him.

His gaze darkened, now possessively intent. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face and the palm on the small of her back pulled her firmly against him. He put his mouth to her ear. “Got an idea of what you want?” She looked around the bar, at the noise and commotion, felt Hunter’s breath on the curve of her neck, his broad, warm hand on her bare back and suddenly wanted nothing in the entire world than to find out exactly how good he could make her feel.

She slid her hand into the cropped hair on the back of his neck. “Let’s talk about that somewhere else.”

Again, the authoritative grip on her hand. Without a word he led her through the bar to the sultry heat of the parking lot, heading for the shadows created by an enormous black SUV arrogantly angled across three parking spaces in the back corner.

“Yours?” she asked as they rounded the truck’s hood.

“Nope, just a place for a private conversation.” He backed her into the passenger door. Hands braced on either side of her head, he fastened his teeth on the sensitive juncture of her neck and shoulder, sucking at her skin with just enough pressure to make her gasp.

Desire burst inside her. “Kiss me,” she said, the words floating breathy and feminine into the shocking quiet of the parking lot.

A small hitch in his even breathing, then he obliged with a maddening, seductive kiss that started with one corner of her mouth, light flicks of his tongue teasing her until she tried to brush her lips across his, desperate for more. To her surprise, he held back, giving her only the merest pressure on his way to the other corner of her mouth, then delivering several soft, tantalizing nips to her full lower lip before she hooked her arms around his neck and took what she had to have. Her mouth open, she swept her tongue over his, tasting, demanding.

It was the first time she'd kissed anyone other than her ex in over fifteen years. She would have sworn on her grandmother's grave that the earth moved, tilting on its axis under her feet. Then he plastered his body against hers and the world disappeared, leaving only the seduction of his talented mouth, the pressure of his torso and the unyielding erection notched between her legs.

Aroused beyond her normal caution, she arched against him. Once she'd done so, she couldn't stop, grinding against him as their mouths danced and melded. He shuddered, the vibration rippling through her body before he tore his mouth from hers.

"Tell me what you want, Lacey."

His low, commanding voice, the way he used her name, sent tremors racing one after the other through her body to coalesce in her wet, needy sex. "I want you in me," she said, yanking his shirt up to slide her hands along his ribs, exploring the hot skin over heavy muscle and bone.

"You're sure about this," he said, his voice strained. One big hand slid under the loose edge of her top to cup her breast, the thumb and forefinger closing over her nipple with enough pressure to make her eyelids droop.

"Yes," she gasped. "Now!"

“Jesus,” he said, but the word wasn’t uncertain. She’d shocked him, in a really good way. He looked through the SUV’s tinted windows, toward the bar. “Gotta be fast.” She nodded jerkily because her hands had found his ridged abdomen. Hunter looked around once more, ascertaining their relative privacy, then cupped her breasts under the silky halter top, palming their weight and plucking at her pebbled nipples.

The deft touch was hard enough to make her whimper but light enough to make her want more as she fumbled with his belt buckle and button fly.

“Fuck,” he said on a sharp inhale as her fingers brushed his hard length. He dug in his back pocket for his wallet and produced a condom. The package held between his teeth, he reached for the button and inch-long zipper of her jeans, working them down along with the scrap of lace functioning as her panties. She kicked off her wickedly high heel and stepped out of one leg of her jeans, breathing fast and shallow as she braced her bared foot on the SUV’s running board. His gaze roamed over her exposed body as he pushed his jeans just below the swell of his ass and rolled the condom down his shaft.

Then his mouth was back on hers, the kiss heated, demanding. His hands clamped down on her hips, holding her still for his short, urgent thrusts, his mouth muffling the little pleading noises rippling from her throat as he inexorably pushed into her. An hour of prolonged, public foreplay left her slippery for him but didn’t prepare her for his size, stretching her swollen, sensitive tissue. One more slick glide seated him to the hilt, his flat abdomen pressed against her belly, her backside to the hard metal of the SUV.

She felt deliciously stretched, her channel adjusting with slow, tingling ripples.

A few moments passed without movement. She opened her eyes to see concern in his.

“Okay?” he asked, restraint etched into his face. “You’re tight.”

“Yes…so good,” she whispered. Her hands skittered down his ribs

to settle on the hot skin of his hips.

He withdrew and slid back in, his broad shaft chafing millions of newly awakened nerve endings inside her. The slow stroke brought him tight against her and forced a 12

sound from her throat, one she'd never made before. He did it again, and again, then her senses contracted until all she knew was the rough thrusts into her, the pressure of his chest against her breasts and the ever-tightening spiral of dark, hot pleasure coiling in her pelvis.

As if from a distance, she heard light, desperate cries.

"Shhhh," he said, his voice strained as he linked their hands and pressed them into the window on either side of her head. "Don't want to draw attention back here." She really didn't mean to be making noises. She never had before, but she was going to fly apart. Her legs were shaking, her heart pounded painfully against her ribcage and her nipples and clit were swollen, throbbing bundles of aching nerves. She simply couldn't stop the soft, pleading pants rippling out into the humid night air.

He took her mouth again, silencing her before the entire bar knew what they were doing in the parking lot. When he angled a big hand between their bodies and rolled her clit with his rough, knowing fingers, every nerve ending in her body burst into flames. She threw her head back in abandon, banging her head on the passenger window. Each urgent thrust thudded her bare bottom against the warm metal of the SUV. She fisted her hands in the black cotton covering his broad shoulders, desperate for any solid ground as the waves crested. A deep stroke coupled with a firm touch on her clit and she exploded, stifling her cry in his shoulder as release pulsed through her.

He kept the same steady, hard rhythm, one forearm braced against the SUV to grip the cargo rack over her head while with the other hand he hoisted her thigh to his hipbone. With her eyes closed,

arms around his neck and her forehead on his shoulder, each ardent stroke triggered delicious aftershocks.

She'd never felt sexier in her life.

One last thrust buried him to the hilt, his cock throbbing within her. She opened her eyes to watch him grit his teeth and shudder, hard, as ecstasy took him. Trembling and panting, she felt an unexpected surge of emotion when he rested his damp forehead on hers. His hot, swollen lips brushed first her cheek, then her mouth as he slowly subsided against her.

After a moment he disengaged their bodies, pulled up his jeans and stepped away to toss the condom into a trashcan at the corner of the lot. Vulnerability swept through her without his big body sheltering hers so she hurriedly yanked her jeans back into place. If the SUV's owner showed up she didn't want to be caught with her pants down.

Now buttoned up, he stood just out of arms' reach, his face in the shadows, muscular arms crossed over his chest. In the silence that followed, she waited for the recriminations, the regrets that should come on the heels of her first sexual encounter with someone other than Davis. But there were none and why should there be? This wild, insane, thrilling parking lot encounter brought her total number of lovers to two, a paltry number in the twenty-first century.

No regrets and no expectations. At any moment, he'd head back into the bar. The night was still young, after all, and she wasn't.

She gave him a weak smile as she smoothed down her top and ran her fingers through her hair to shake the layers back into place. The silence stretched out as he watched her with an unreadable expression on his face. She was on the verge of doing something really stupid, like extending her hand to make her goodbyes, when

he spoke.

“You’re probably still prejudiced against the missionary position,” he offered, his voice gruff.

For the second time that night, he made her laugh. “That’s not what I thought you were going to say,” she said.

At her reply, some of the tension eased from his shoulders. He took two steps closer, out of the shadows at the back of the lot. “What did you think I was going to say?”

“Drive safely.”

“Ah,” he said and for the first time a smile spread across his face, now illuminated by the lights in the parking lot. Humor softened his hard-angled face and provided an intriguing glimpse into the man behind the player. Lacey felt her stomach flip-flop.

But he wasn’t asking her out. He was offering more sex, nothing else. That was all she wanted.

“Prejudices are usually pretty ingrained,” she said slowly, as if considering his ability to make her change her mind.

“Wait ’till I get you under me in a bed,” he said, bracing his shoulder against the SUV.

Better and better, but sex in a parking lot was one thing. Letting him into her house was another thing entirely. “You have a last name, Hunter?”

“Smart woman. Anderson. Hunter Anderson.” He rattled off his badge number, precinct, address, email address and phone numbers with such speed she giggled.

“Don’t go back in that bar looking for someone else to take home.” It wasn’t a plea. She partnered with powerful men accustomed to having their orders obeyed and recognized a command when she heard one.

“I won’t,” she said. She laid her palm flat against the sweat-

dampened t-shirt covering his chest. “I drive a cream BMW.”

He nodded toward an electric blue motorcycle that looked dangerously fast. “I’ll follow you,” he said.

Her hand drifted lower. “Of course,” she said absently, distracted by the ridges of his abdomen under her fingers.

The muscles tightened before he stopped her hand at his belt. “We’ll be lucky if I get you home before round two. Go.”

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Chapter Two

He didn't belong here. Hunter knew that as well as he knew the procedures for making a traffic stop on a car driven by someone with priors and an outstanding arrest warrant for armed robbery.

Too late.

Releasing his too-tight grip on Lacey's hip, he drew in a slow, shaky breath, lifted his weight onto his forearms and gently eased away from her limp body. She winced as he withdrew. He started to apologize, but she smiled at him, murmured "So good," and turned on her side.

Okay, then. He went to the bathroom to toss the condom, the third of the night. For a long moment he took in his surroundings, standing in the door between the bathroom and bedroom. Moonlight lay in a gleaming smooth path on the oak plank floors then rippled with the twisted sheets draped gently over the curve of Lacey's hip and upper thigh. Darkness obscured the rest of her body, centered in her enormous brass bed. Not a squeak, creak or groan from the metal frame, not even when things got athletic. That kind of silence cost money. Lots of it.

The night had gotten off to a bad start when his friend ditched him for a blonde he'd been pursuing for weeks. Already waiting at Buff, Hunter watched women stream into the bar and figured *fuck it*. Buff didn't charge a cover and he was there. One beer and he'd go home. Sleep sounded almost as good as drinking and dancing.

Blocking his route to the bar was a fine, toned back held slim and straight above a nicely shaped ass. When the woman turned around at his "excuse me", her wide brown eyes, pretty red hair and a shockingly innocent flare of visceral awareness hit him like a fist in his gut. He held off from touching her until the second time she stepped in front of him. More abrupt than he should have been, he put his thumbs in the dimples on either side of her spine, just to

move her, but the nervous twitch that ran under her skin caught his attention. The faint wrinkles around her eyes when she smiled intrigued him as much as her open examination of the whole bar scene.

He braced his shoulder against the doorframe and considered his options. Based on her soft, even breathing she was asleep, or fast getting there. No reason to get back in bed, because even a set of blonde nympho triplets couldn't coax another hard-on out of his flagging dick. He'd had a fine night, better than he expected. For damn sure he'd eradicated Lacey's prejudices against the missionary position. He was free to go.

He didn't. Drawn to soft cotton sheets and softer pale skin, against his better judgment he got back into bed. At least a dozen white eyelet pillows lay scattered on the wood floor, hurled off the bed when she so sweetly begged him to fuck her harder that he needed to grip the edge of the mattress for leverage.

15

Anne Calhoun

Three-thirty in the morning. The hour wasn't unusual for him. Neither was the scent of sex, redolent with musk and sweat, hanging in the air of her bedroom.

The woman was. Small and slender, she lacked the gym-toned tautness he often saw on "women of a certain age" prowling at Buff. If she was an experienced cougar playing the innocent, she'd fooled him.

His finger, dark against her pale skin, trembled from hours of raw, hot exertion as he moved it up to gently smooth back a strand of hair stuck to her cheek. There was no purpose to this touch, just a simple caress of her cheek with the back of his finger for the simple pleasure of feeling her smooth, heated skin under his hand.

He drew back his hand and looked around again. The bedroom held an antique mahogany armoire, matching dressing table and a chaise

lounge next to the small fireplace filled for the summer with fresh flowers. He'd followed her from Buff, on the city's south side, to a white two-story Colonial with a professionally landscaped garden and a sun porch in the old-money Oak Grove neighborhood. Not his usual hookup, not with a big, old house filled with antiques, the BMW, the impeccably renovated sixty-thousand-dollar kitchen. He knew pretty well to the penny what Lacey's fine kitchen cost, because he spent his days off helping his dad with his home renovation business.

He normally didn't get a tour of a hookup's house, but to settle her obvious nerves he asked for a beer when she shut the door behind him. She'd flicked on the light over the stove and got him a Corona he had no intention of finishing, but he drank part of it anyway and watched her look at him with those open, curious eyes. When her smile went from hesitant to aware he'd undone the ties on her top and kissed every inch of her fine back. Then he'd hoisted her up on the granite-topped island, worked off her jeans and thong and used his tongue to draw slow circles around her clit until she was quivering, then pleading, then sobbing in satisfaction, her hands clamped around the granite's edge because they couldn't get a grip in his regulation buzz cut.

She'd slipped on the way up the stairs and so he dropped to his knees on the runner and covered her body with his.

Right here on the stairs?

Right here on the stairs.

He'd shoved his jeans down just far enough to slide his cock into her from behind, using the last condom in his wallet in the process. Thank God she had a box by the bed.

An unopened box. He didn't miss that detail. Lacey was prepared and choosy.

Goose bumps rippled across her skin as he watched, her body cooling without him over her, inside her. Moving carefully he pulled the sheet up to her shoulder and eased out of bed. He pulled on his jeans, then padded barefoot down the stairs in search of his

shirt and some water. In the kitchen he opened solid maple cabinets until he found a glass, ran water from the fridge door and drank. He refilled the glass, drank again, then snagged his shirt from the floor by the fireplace and tugged it over his head. He was dressed, his bike outside, his boots and helmet by a mahogany table in her foyer that 16

also held a notepad and a pen. He could leave a note and go. Hell, he didn't even have to leave a note. Welcome to Hookup Alley, Lacey.

Home wasn't far, maybe a mile closer to downtown, in a house of similar age but lesser quality, split into apartments in the seventies and not renovated since. He looked around the kitchen. He didn't belong here any more than she belonged at Buff. His commitment to public service didn't include guiding newly divorced thirty-something women through the pitfalls and traps of the meat market. Girls he went home with knew the rules of the game. Smart and self-assured, Lacey didn't need his protection from the average player.

He'd followed her home. Showed her a few new tricks. He was free to go.

He wanted to make her lunch.

The urge made no sense, but it was there, slowly replacing the instinct to bounce.

He glanced in the fridge and found nine-grain bread and six different kinds of gourmet cheeses. Cheddar. Two kinds of Gouda. Havarti. Swiss. Asiago. Jarlsberg. Lacey had almost fifty dollars worth of cheese in her fridge and organic tomatoes in a ceramic bowl on the counter. His dad couldn't cook for shit. Faced with the prospect of TV

dinners every night, Hunter learned the basics of meal prep as soon as he could handle the stove and he made fantastic grilled cheese

and tomato sandwiches.

The exhaustion dogging him since before he walked into Buff helped him give up figuring out the urge to play chef or the hesitation to have her wake up alone. He put the glass in the dishwasher and climbed the stairs. The moonlight had shifted up Lacey's body, now highlighting the curve of her cheek, her reddish-brown lashes dark against the pale skin. He shucked his jeans, jostling the mattress as little as possible as he lifted the sheet and slid in next to her.

Then the moonlight was sunlight, bright and hot even when filtered through the sheer curtains. He lay on his stomach, the sheet at his waist, Lacey still curled on her side, facing away from him. One elbow caught the sheet at her lower ribcage. In the full light of day the stubble burn on her breasts and collarbone stood out in reddish patches.

If she'd moved at all during the night, he couldn't tell.

He scrubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands, looked around for the clock, then rubbed his eyes again because the numbers must be wrong. They finally came into focus. It was almost noon, which explained the sun's heat and intensity. He'd slept for almost nine hours in a strange bed and damn, he felt good.

His jeans lay in a jumble at the foot of the bed. He grabbed them and made a pit stop in the bathroom, also recently remodeled with two cobalt blue pottery bowls for sinks and thick white towels stacked in the mahogany cabinet. The big shower stall was a work of art, tiled in mosaic swirls of green and blue that started as dark as the ocean floor, lightening to sky and surface colors at around shoulder height. Six different showerheads could be positioned for massage spray and a seat ran the length of one wall.

He stepped lightly on the stairs, not wanting to wake her, and

pushed through the swinging door that led to the kitchen. One deep drawer by the six-burner professional-grade range held a stash of well-seasoned cast iron frying pans. As he sliced the bread and shredded the Jarlsberg, he looked around the kitchen. White walls were decorated with sky-blue art. A large oak farmhouse table and six chairs stood just beyond the island in front of a fireplace that opened into both the kitchen and living room.

As the pan heated, he dumped out the coffee brewed by an automatic timer set for six a.m. and started fresh, then walked barefoot over the slate floors to the French doors at the opposite end of the kitchen. He found the sun porch running the width of the house's south side. The space, full of white wicker furniture and plants, with books, board games and magazines stacked on side tables, was already warm but would be pleasantly cooled by the ceiling fans. Yet another white brick fireplace was filled with several dozen white long-stemmed roses. Real roses, he learned as he bent to touch one, not fake flowers that would last all summer.

"Jesus," he said under his breath. He knew exactly jack about decorating, but even he could tell that everything Lacey owned was top-of-the-line, the kind of expensive things that looked deceptively affordable. Her divorce must have been extremely lucrative. In the light of day it was clear he could make himself as comfortable as he wanted, but he should have left last night. He did *not* belong here.

The soft rush of water through pipes caught his attention, so he went back into the kitchen and closed the French doors behind him. The pan was just the right temperature, the coffee ready when Lacey pushed open the kitchen door. Her red hair was half-dry and tousled around her face. She wore a short white robe made from the same kind of material as his t-shirt, except it looked about a hundred times softer and thinner as it clung to her skin. Her beautiful brown eyes widened when she saw him, then a small, pleased smile curved her lips.

In that moment he knew why he'd stayed. He didn't want her to think he was the kind of asshole who picked up a woman at a bar, fucked her and left in the middle of the night. So what if this was the first time he hadn't been that asshole? She didn't need to know that.

“Oh,” she said as she put her hand to her hair. “Good morning.” The self-conscious move tugged at his heart. He looked pointedly at the clock, softening the gesture with what passed for a smile for him.

“Oh, well then. Good afternoon,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

He thought about kissing her, because even classy, rich and out of his league, she was prettier fresh out of the shower. There was no denying her age, although he doubted she spent much time in the sun, with her pale skin. Her eyes were slightly puffy from sleep, the beginnings of lines forming around her mouth when she smiled, but the humor and intelligence in her face captivated him, pure and simple.

He turned away from the urge to taste her soft, pink lips. “I made fresh coffee. I hope that’s okay.”

“Making coffee is a very, very good thing,” she said. “Have you had any?” When he shook his head she moved around the island to stand next to him. She reached for the cabinet above the coffeemaker, the robe riding up to expose firm, slender thighs. She took down a delicate floral cup and a thick ceramic mug, poured hot coffee into both, set the sugar bowl on the counter and found a matching creamer pot in the fridge. Hunter declined both with a shake of his head and drank the black hot brew.

Lacey added enough sugar to turn the coffee to sludge, a healthy dollop of cream and inhaled deeply before sipping.

“Wonderful,” she said, then looked at the pan, the bread and the shredded cheese heaped on the counter. “Grilled cheese sandwiches?” Shit, he should have made breakfast food, but he never ate breakfast so it didn’t occur to him. His regular shift was four-to-midnight. He didn’t get to bed until two or three in the morning and got up around lunchtime.

“I can do eggs,” he started.

“No, no. I love real grilled cheese. It’s just…my grandmother used to make them this way, except with Cheddar cheese and thick whole wheat bread she baked herself.

She’d fry bacon and mix that in with the cheese. After she died I made the sandwiches myself for a while, then got out of the habit.”

“Bacon? Never tried that,” he said, mentally constructing a meat-lovers grilled cheese sandwich.

“If the bacon’s hot it helps melt the cheese. I love the sandwiches, but my metabolism isn’t what it used to be.”

“Think you burned off plenty of calories last night,” he said as he buttered one slice of bread and dropped it in the pan.

She sipped at her coffee again, a blush staining her cheekbones until their color matched the scrapes on her collarbone. “True.”

Damn, he liked that blush. He carefully sprinkled the cheese over the toasting bread, added two thick tomato slices, buttered the top piece of bread and set it unbuttered side down on top of the even layer of cheese. He adjusted the heat under the pan because the trick with grilling real cheese was to slowly melt it, not burn the bread and leave the cheese cold through the center.

One hip braced against the counter, Lacey watched him work, her floral cup held gently between her hands. “I didn’t think you’d be here this morning,” she said as he built the second sandwich in the pan.

“Why’s that?” he asked. A nasty thought hit him. He’d spent so much mental energy wondering why he didn’t want to leave that he never bothered to think about whether or not she wanted him to stay. Maybe the novelty had worn off.

“I’ve never done this before, but my best friend was single most of the time I was married. She said guys almost never stay.”

"Your friend's right," he said, resisting the urge to mash down the sandwiches, just to have something to do with his hands. "I'll go if you've got plans."

"Not a one," she said. "Not a single one."

Settle the fuck down, Anderson. She seems fine with this.

"The renovation's recent," he said.

"Last year," she agreed, following his conversational lead. "The kitchen had been redone in the early nineties but I wanted more energy efficient appliances and a new look."

"Dan Walker did it?" he asked, but he knew the answer to that question.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"He's my dad's biggest competitor."

"Your father is Michael Anderson? Anderson Renovations?" At his nod she continued, clearly pleased to have made a connection. "I really liked his design and his estimate was within two hundred dollars of Daniel's, but he had a four-month wait."

"Dad loses more customers because he won't hire foremen. He figures he can supervise two jobs at a time, no more." Hunter peeked under the sandwiches. The bottom layer of cheese was melting nicely, the bread a light golden brown. Perfect.

She watched him flip the first sandwich. "Do you work with your father?"

"Sometimes. Depends on his schedule and mine. I work four-on-two-off so my days off rotate. If he needs a hand and I'm off, I help."

"So I might have met you last year."

“You hired Walker, remember?”

“True. I was married then, so it’s probably for the best.” He tried to imagine coming over to help his dad do demo, or measure for cabinets, install the slate flooring, seeing Lacey two or three times over the course of the job. He wouldn’t have noticed her right off, but as the meetings added up, he might have been interested in something he couldn’t have. Married women were completely off limits.

There were too many single women in the city to bother with a guaranteed clusterfuck.

And Lacey wouldn’t have looked twice at a dust-covered contractor working on her kitchen.

He cleared his throat. “How long have you been divorced?”

“Three months. We were separated for almost a year before that.” Definitely on the rebound and it was none of his business. “If you want anything else with these sandwiches, now’s a good time to start making it,” he said as he assessed the melting cheese.

She took down plates and pulled salad ingredients from the fridge, quickly throwing together a tossed salad with the rest of the tomatoes, cucumbers, a few mushrooms and croutons. The robe loosened as she worked, revealing the swell of her breast before she retied it firmly around her waist.

Her gaze skimmed over his jeans and t-shirt, then she lifted a hand to her collar. “I should get dressed.”

“The food’s ready,” he said.

She tightened her belt another fraction of an inch. It was sheer torture, knowing she was naked under the robe, a test of his willpower. He’d successfully resisted the urge to kiss her. He wasn’t

taking her back upstairs.

The table seated six, two on each long edge and one at the head and foot. Lacey slid out a chair along the side nearest the island. Circumventing the problem of sitting at the head of the table, the spot presumably occupied by her ex-husband, he set a plate in front of Lacey and took the seat next to her. She pushed the salad bowl his way and they settled into the meal. Her sigh of appreciation when she bit into the gooey sandwich made him ridiculously proud.

When she finished he could tell she was thinking what to say next, so he solved that problem for her.

“I’m heading out, Lacey,” he said, then firmed up the reluctance in his voice before justifying this entirely rational statement. “I’m in a charity event later this afternoon and I need to do a couple of things before then.”

Nice. Like you could impress her.

“Of course,” she said. “Thank you for lunch. It was delicious.” He considered her. No trace remained of the sleek, chic woman scanning the scene at Buff. Her lips were still all sexy and swollen, her chin and collarbone pink from his stubble, and a very languid, satisfied look softened her eyes. But even in her robe with her hair dried in waves around her face she screamed money.

And she met his eyes without flinching. A trained observer, he habitually looked people in the eye but she didn’t look away. She also didn’t try to stare him down, just met his gaze with complete confidence.

“You don’t look like a Lacey,” he said. In his world, strippers and hookers used Lacey as an alias for Chris or Susan or Jennifer.

“It’s Laetitia, actually, after a minor Roman goddess of joy. My father called me his lacey girl because my baby clothes were trimmed with lace. The nickname stuck.” Definitely time to go. Where the hell were the not-so-subtle hints for something more? Even a phone number and a “call me sometime”?

She took a breath. *Here it comes,* he thought, then about-faced yet again and reminded himself why he couldn't accept the inevitable suggestion for coffee, or a drink, or dinner. *This won't end well for you. You're busy even when every third cop isn't out on some kind of training or leave. You work 4 to midnight…*

"I know this will sound naïve or even condescending," she started, "but thank you.

Last night was really wonderful. I haven't…well, it could have been ugly and it wasn't."

Oh, Jesus. He didn't do married women and he didn't do virgins, literal or figurative. Separated for a year and divorced for three months, she'd had plenty of time for a relationship, but he knew. "I was your first since your divorce."

"Was it that obvious?" Chagrin crossed her face. "I really didn't want to be a cliché, the newly single woman looking for reassurance with anyone she could get into her bed, but yes, you were the first man I've slept with since my divorce. My first hook up ever. My first public sex, too. I sound naïve, don't I?" She gave a little laugh and finished her coffee.

She hadn't seemed desperate. Hot as hell, a livewire of sexual promise humming under her observational surface, yes, but not desperate. "You sound like a woman who gave fifteen years to a marriage that ended. And you weren't obvious, either." The likelihood that he was first in a long line of men following her pricey BMW home made his gut churn. He tried to pass it off as concern for her safety. "Look, when you go back to Buff, don't—"

She interrupted him with an embarrassed shake of her head. "I'm not going back to Buff. I just wondered…if maybe it was possible… if the books and movies weren't exaggerating and people really did feel…well…swept away by desire." He tried to keep a straight face

but determination and years of practice on the street failed him. “And?” he asked, the smile unfamiliarly wrinkling the corners of his eyes.

“Another first,” she said.

He liked how she looked him straight in the eye, without a hint of flirtation, when she talked. He really liked being her first at something. But being with her was as shocking as licking a battery and for him, about as smart.

“Good.”

The silence stretched between them and she broke it with a nervous question.

“What charity event?”

In her world, charity events probably meant a tux and cruise packages up for auction. Not so much in his. “Ultimate Frisbee. It’s soccer, played with a Frisbee,” he said, giving the simple explanation. “We’re playing the firefighters’ team this afternoon, around four at Memorial Park, to raise money for the Boys and Girls Club. Should be a good turnout.” He picked up his plate and stood to leave.

“No, don’t mind the dishes. I’ll clean up in a few minutes.” In the foyer he grabbed his helmet and patted his pockets in search of his keys.

Lacey waited patiently while he bit his tongue to keep *Maybe I’ll see you later?* out of the air of her sunny, quiet house. He’d mentioned the UF game once and that was enough.

She lived five minutes from Memorial Park. She’d said she had no plans for the day.

She wasn’t asking him to stay.

“Goodbye, Hunter,” she said and reached for the doorknob.

The fact that she was wearing almost nothing and asking for

nothing sealed the deal. With the hand not holding his helmet he cupped her head and held her still for the 22

long, hot, sweet kiss he'd wanted since she walked through the kitchen door. Without hesitation she opened her mouth to him, the fingers of one hand slowly curling into his shirt, the other hand gripping his biceps, the nails digging into his skin when he flicked his tongue lightly against the curve of her lower lip.

The kiss ended things on his terms, but knowing he was her first, not her last hookup, burned in his gut. Given the daytime realities of cop and classy divorcee, there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it, so he opened the door and jogged down her flagstone sidewalk to his bike. She watched from the doorway, red hair mussed, body soft and warm, as he straddled the bike and zipped out of her driveway.

Out of her life.

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Chapter Three

The motion on the field surged and halted, flowed and ebbed so abruptly Lacey found it hard to follow the Frisbee's bullet-like movements, but she had no problem picking Hunter out of the fourteen players on the field. The firefighters wore bright red shirts, while Hunter's team was shirtless. The visual spectacle of so many bare, toned torsos should have made it hard to pick him out in the swirling, sweating melee, but she found him immediately.

"There he is," she said, pointing.

Claire shrugged her shoulder to adjust baby Melanie's sling and gave an absent-minded jostle to Connor's stroller. "In the blue shorts?"

"No, he's wearing black shorts, white running shoes. See, he's got the Frisbee—" Hunter came to an abrupt halt, twisting and turning from his hips as he looked through his wrap-around sunglasses for a teammate to pass to. The red-shirted man guarding him began the count to ten that timed Hunter's hold on the Frisbee. Five minutes of research on the Internet taught her that the player with the Frisbee must remain immobile while other players jockeyed for position upfield. The goal was to advance the Frisbee to the opposing team's goal, ultimately passing the disc to a player standing in the end zone.

"I see him," Claire said. She put her hand to her straight blonde hair in a gesture Lacey recognized as the same unconscious grooming attempt she'd foolishly made this morning when she found Hunter in her kitchen. "Damn, girl."

"He has to the count of ten to pass now." Lacey shielded her eyes from the brutal late afternoon sunlight and attempted to disguise her excited voice and visceral reaction with a UF lesson. "If the other team knocks the Frisbee down, or a player drops it, it's a turnover."

At the firefighter's call of "eight!" Hunter pivoted on one foot, bent forward and slung the disc to a bare-chested teammate sprinting down the sideline. The player caught it and braked abruptly, a different firefighter dancing in front of him, arms flailing in a blocking defense while he began the count. Hunter took off at a dead run and lost his defender while weaving between red shirts and his own teammates. He broke free of the pack of players, sprinted into the end zone without a pursuer, then turned and shouted, waving his arms. His teammate sent the Frisbee arrowing toward him, seemingly just beyond Hunter's reach. With a diving catch he plucked the disc from the air an inch from the ground.

An exultant shout went up from the assembled throng as Hunter bounded to his feet. He flashed a quick smile while exchanging fist bumps with his teammates before 24

passing the disc to another player, quickly brushing grass and dirt from his chest and abdomen as the two teams gathered in the end zones to begin the next series.

Cops and firefighters holding buckets moved through the good-sized crowd, collecting donations for the Boys and Girls Club. Lacey pulled several twenties from her pocket and put them in the bucket, getting a "thank you, ma'am" from the big, broad man before he extended the bucket to Claire.

The need to walk Connor to sleep got Lacey to the park. Claire came by at four-thirty with two fussy kids, spit-up on both shoulders and a desperate look on her face, so Lacey succumbed to fate. While she had no intention of making herself known to Hunter, she wouldn't mind unobtrusively watching the game while updating her friend on the results of her night at Buff. His attention firmly focused on the action, Hunter had given no indication he'd seen her or was scanning the crowd for her, saving Lacey the embarrassment of seeming like a high school girl hanging out near the quarterback, hoping to catch his eye.

Connor let out a sleepy squall from the stroller. "I've got to keep

moving until he's sound asleep," Claire said. "Do you plan to wait around for your cop boy toy after the game?"

"He's not my boy toy," Lacey said.

Claire looked surprised by her sharp response, so Lacey added in a more reasonable voice, "He's twenty-eight, not a boy, and we're not dating." With just one hookup under her belt, she knew the rules. They weren't hard to figure out. Meaningless sex, the wordless intimacy of two bodies striving together for mutual pleasure then going their separate ways. It was as simple, and as complicated, as that.

"Good. Guys like him are rarely interested in more than sex," Claire said. They cleared the crowd around the field and made their way to one of the asphalt walking paths. "He was hot, though. Very dark, very handsome and very nicely built. He actually had six-pack abs. How do you do that?"

Lacey had licked every ridge in that abdomen and the deliciously thick shaft arching up over the ridges. "Do what? Here, let me…" She took the stroller from Claire and pushed, the expensive jogging stroller moving easily over the sidewalk.

Claire sighed with relief and peeked into the sling. "I feel like a pack mule most days, not the wife of a partner in a law firm. Get the best of what's available. When you wanted a relationship, you had Davis, smart, kind, devoted to you. Now you want a hookup and you've got Holden—"

"Hunter."

"Hunter," Claire continued, "who looks dangerously gorgeous, or gorgeously dangerous, and by the sounds of things, fucked you senseless and was a gentleman while he was at it."

"You could get a nanny, you know, or just some part-time help. And look how well things turned out with Davis. So devoted he wanted a divorce." 25

Claire wisely didn't start in on Davis. "I'm interviewing nannies. College girls, mostly. Did you really pick this guy up at Buff and do it in the parking lot?" Maybe it was the late afternoon heat and sunshine, maybe it was the sight of Hunter's tanned, gleaming torso, but Lacey's head was spinning. "Can we carry on one conversation at a time, please?" she said with a laugh. "You're getting some help?"

"Afternoons so I can get dinner ready if I nap with the kids. I need the nap and everyone needs to eat. We finally ran out of the casseroles you sent over after Melanie arrived. Julian's understanding, but he seems to expect a meal after work. Happy?"

"Yes. You've looked exhausted."

"I'm thirty-seven and I've had two babies in fifteen months," Claire said tersely.

"All the more reason to get some help. You don't have to be Superwoman," Lacey said with a smile.

Mollified, Claire moved on. "The parking lot? My God! I don't think I did it in the parking lot when I was twenty and wild, or thirty and wild."

"Shhhhhhh!" Lacey looked around as they strolled under the oak and maple trees lining the path through Memorial Park. Now in a shady portion of the park, she pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head.

"And he was there when you woke up this morning?"

"He made me lunch. Grilled cheese sandwiches."

"With the fake American cheese I feed Connor, or the real kind Nana used to make?"

"The real kind."

"Did he shred the cheese?"

Lacey nodded.

“Wow.” Claire peeked under the blanket draped over the stroller, then headed for an empty bench in the shade. “Let’s sit for a minute while they’re both asleep.”

“That’s a big deal, the fact that he shredded cheese?”

“The fact that he wasn’t zipping his jeans on his way out the door is a big deal.

Shredding cheese is akin to a sighting of an image of the Virgin Mary on a slice of toast.” She eased the sling down and cupped baby Melanie’s tiny head, dark hair clinging sweatily to the soft skull. The infant’s rosebud mouth worked in her sleep.

“She’s beautiful,” Lacey said, her voice soft.

“Yeah. I wish motherhood wasn’t such a blur,” Claire said. “You sound let down.” Lacey watched the leaves toss in the hot breeze and thought about how to answer that question. “No, I’m very happy with the outcome.” The *outcome*. She’d danced in a club, had sex up against an SUV with the hottest guy she’d ever met, had more mind-shattering orgasms than she could count and eaten her first grilled cheese sandwich in years. And every time she thought about him, her 26

nipples tightened against the lace of her bra and the tender flesh between her thighs clenched in response.

“And? This is what hooking up feels like,” Claire said, the mild tone softening her words.

“I didn’t expect a marriage proposal after one night. I knew what I wanted—a man I felt powerfully attracted to. My mouth went dry when he touched me and I couldn’t stop staring at him. I wanted his hands all over me and when he…” Her voice trailed off. Memories flashed through her, the way he’d settled between her thighs and adjusted the cant of her hips to suit him, of his powerful, muscular body pressed against hers for each slow, rhythmic stroke, his tanned hands against the pale skin of her breasts and hips, the scrape of his

teeth over her collarbone, her nipples, her inner thighs. His dark green eyes, solemn, intense, but ferocious in climax.

She cleared her throat and looked away from Claire's knowing gaze. "I didn't expect to like him. He made me laugh. I wouldn't mind getting to know him."

"You're not cut out for casual sex, honey," Claire said gently. "You feel too much, care too easily."

"And he doesn't?"

"Honestly? Grilled cheese notwithstanding, he probably liked your ass in your jeans, or just felt like scratching an itch."

"Probably," Lacey agreed reluctantly. She was no hookup expert, but Hunter's kiss goodbye wasn't perfunctory, dismissive. He kissed her like he'd been holding back, like he regretted going.

After fifteen years in the meat market, Claire was neither romantic nor sentimental.

"Did he ask for your number?"

Ouch. "He didn't even ask for my last name," she admitted.

"Don't hold your breath, sweetie. He's smokin' hot and a cop to boot. He's probably got badge bunnies all over him." She looked at her watch. "I have to go. Julian promised to feed Connor while I nurse Lanie so we can get an hour of alone time tonight. He's picking us up at the bottom of the hill. Want a ride home?"

"I think I'll stay a while. It's a nice afternoon and the sun porch gets warm this time of year."

Claire gave her a kiss on the cheek, then stood carefully to avoid jostling the sleeping infant. "Call me tomorrow. Julian says the new partner's a very eligible bachelor looking to settle down. Perfect for you." Lacey smiled. Perfect for her. "I will. You're sure you don't need help with the stroller?"

"It's all downhill from here," Claire said as she headed for the

waiting at the bottom of the hill. Nearby the Ultimate game was breaking up, players and spectators streaming to cars parked on the side streets. Hunter was nowhere to be seen.

27

Anne Calhoun

Lacey put her sunglasses on and tipped her head back, absorbing the heat of the late August rays beaming down on her face. Perfect for her. Another partner in a law firm, another man with a pedigree, the right degrees, the right attitudes, the right direction in life.

How did she know what was perfect for her? She thought she'd had it, for fifteen years. Then it disappeared in the wreckage of *starting over*. What was perfection? Did *right* last?

"Hi."

Her head snapped forward so quickly her oversized sunglasses slid down to the tip of her nose. Hunter stood before her, bits of grass clinging to the tanned skin stretched over honed muscles. His dark brown hair was almost black with sweat and while his eyes were hidden behind his shades, she sensed a hint of pleasure in the softer cast of his mouth. A t-shirt dangled from one hand.

"I didn't think you saw me," she said.

"Redheads stand out in a crowd," he said. He sat down beside her and stretched his legs out into the asphalt path. "Like the game?"

"Very interesting," she said. "Your team seemed to play more strategically than the firefighters."

"They don't have a regular team, just got together for this game," he said. "Some of my guys have been playing together since college. Who was with you?"

“My friend Claire and her children.”

“The hookup expert?” he said.

“Before marriage and children,” Lacey clarified. He continued to look at her, his eyes totally hidden behind the sunglasses, but the firm set of his mouth told her he thought she’d crowed over her “conquest”.

“Hunter! I wouldn’t…I never…I didn’t tell her anything but the most basic facts.” One dark eyebrow rose over the frame of the sunglasses.

If he were going to accuse her of truly tasteless behavior, he’d have look her in the eye and speak the words. “Would you mind taking off your sunglasses while we’re talking, please?”

Without a word he reached up and removed the glasses. Sheer amusement danced in his green eyes while the rest of his face was carved from stone.

“Oh, you…” she said.

“You’d never talk cheap like that,” he said. He settled his shades on top of his head as he looked out over the park’s grassy expanse. The war memorial stood at the top of the hill, the city’s busiest street ran along the bottom, near the Ultimate field. Walking paths meandered in between trees and overgrown groves of bushes along the sides.

“Really? I could be lying. I could have told her everything. Descriptions of your…anatomy. Techniques.”

He stretched his arms along the back of the bench, comfortable confidence radiating from his big body. “No way. You blush just thinking about it. You couldn’t get the words out.”

She crossed her arms and silently damned her pale skin. “You are mistaken.”

“Put your money where your mouth is, beautiful. Say ‘He fucked me to a screaming orgasm on the stairs’ or ‘The last time I came, I scratched the hell out of his shoulders.’” The intimation of his last sentence squashed the pleasure rising in her at his charming-but-inaccurate nickname. Horrified, she looked over his shoulder. He leaned forward and twisted his torso away from her. Faint crescent-shaped indentations marred the skin just above his shoulder blades. He sat back, a rueful grin on his face.

“I’m just glad you didn’t have those fake nails.”

“I am absolutely mortified,” she said.

“And that’s how I know you didn’t tell your friend anything.” She reached up hesitantly and touched the marks with one fingertip. “I’m sorry.” The look in his eyes was sheer heat and promise. “I’ll sacrifice a little skin to watch you come under me, beautiful.”

He didn’t have any trouble talking dirty. The words melted through her, leaving her throat dry and tight. She looked out over the enormous expanse of grassy hill that comprised Memorial Park. Children scampered after a small, yapping white terrier, the parents laughing at the antics of both offspring and pet as they tried to catch the dog. It was a perfect scene, the kind everyone kept insisting she could have, if she hurried.

When she informed her family she and Davis had moved from separating to divorcing, only a century’s worth of breeding kept her mother from saying, “You should have started a family earlier.”

She didn’t regret that. She’d thought she regretted not experimenting more, but maybe not. Her efforts to be fun, sexy and casual weren’t far short of a disaster.

“You look really pretty,” Hunter said, his voice softer. Intimate.

She hadn’t forgotten he was there. The electricity dancing along the entire right-hand side of her body prevented that. At his words she

looked down at her flared white skirt and fitted rose-colored sleeveless blouse, then fiddled with one of the fabric-covered buttons. This outfit was more her usual style, the simple, classic, unobtrusive look of a woman who didn't use the f-word or dig her fingernails into her lover's shoulders. "Thank you," she said. "I don't usually dress like I did last night."

"Sure," he said, then waited another couple of beats. "I didn't mean to embarrass you, Lacey."

"I'm not embarrassed." She crossed her legs and plucked at the embroidery along the pockets of her skirt. Claire said she wasn't cut out for casual sex. Hunter thought she couldn't talk dirty and this blasted skirt came to her knees! What on earth had she been thinking to plan and execute a hook up with a stranger? That wasn't her. None of 29

this was her and what had been fun now felt like she was trying to be someone she wasn't.

"It's getting late and I should go home," she said, and stood up to put emphasis to the words. "I'm sure we both have a busy week ahead of us. Thank you for telling me about the Ultimate game. That was another first for me." And her last with him. She smoothed down her skirt and resettled her sunglasses on her nose as she turned to walk away.

"Lacey." His implacable voice halted her in her tracks as effectively as his command to not go back into Buff.

She turned to see him sitting forward, his forearms braced on his knees, sunglasses pushed up to the top of his head while he looked at her. "Any time in your busy week for me to take you to dinner?"

The sex had been mind-shattering, but she wasn't so desperate she needed to accept a pity date. "Thank you, but that's not…"

He interrupted her, in the same no-nonsense voice. "I *like* how you blush, beautiful." He looked at his running shoes, then back at her.

An emotion she couldn't identify simmered in his eyes. "Can't be done with your firsts, either." *Oh. Oh oh oh.* "Dinner sounds lovely. When?"

"I'm off Friday and Saturday next week."

She remembered his rotating schedule of four days on duty, followed by two days off. "I'm free Saturday."

"You have a last name, Lacey?"

The words, echoing her question before taking him home, startled a laugh from her lungs and sent a tiny little spark of warmth to her heart. "Meyers." She reached in her pocket for her Tiffany business card case and handed him a card. "My home and cell numbers are on that."

He rubbed his thumb and forefinger over the thick linen stock. "You carry cards around with you?"

"I never leave home without business cards," she said. Any entrepreneur worth the name always carried cards. Professionals did not scribble names and numbers on cocktail napkins, or worse, on the backs of hands.

"I didn't get one at Buff," he said, the corners of his beautiful mouth lifting in a grin. She was beginning to hope for that smile, the one that softened his often unreadable face.

"It completely slipped my mind," she said in an effort to maintain some dignity.

And there was the smile. Hunter slowly shook his head then tucked the card in his pocket. "See you next weekend, beautiful."

"I'm looking forward to it," she said. Her heart tripped in anticipation of a simple dinner date.

Apparently she and *different* were going to get much better acquainted.

* * * * *

Hunter held open the door to Burger King, automatically scanning the parking lot as two sleek-haired office workers wearing tight skirts and heels swept past him without a look or a word of acknowledgement. He caught up with his dad by the counter.

“It’s the dust, kid,” his dad said with a sidelong glance at the women.

The anonymity was a relief. The simplest way to attract attention from women was to put on a uniform and go out in public, something he did five days a week, minimum.

Wearing the paint-spattered, drywall-dust-covered, shapeless jeans and t-shirt of a construction worker gave him a chance to just do his thing.

His father ordered, then turned to him. “What are you having?”

“I’ve got it,” Hunter said as he dug in his front pocket for his wallet.

“Your money’s no good here,” his father said, elbowing him in the ribs. “Give him a veggie burger,” he said to the teenager behind the counter.

“Whopper with cheese and onion rings,” Hunter said hastily before the kid, who bore a strong resemblance to the cocker spaniel owned by an ex-girlfriend, could follow through on his father’s order. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Thanks for the help today,” his dad said. “Andy couldn’t make it. His wife was up all night with the sick baby then started throwing up herself this morning.”

“No problem,” Hunter said and picked up their tray of food.

“You don’t have much of a life,” his dad observed on their way to a booth. “You didn’t have any plans?”

Fixing a rattle on his bike, washing the car for Saturday since the weather forecast looked clear until then, paying bills, going to the gym and he was due for a couple of hours at the range. “Nothing I couldn’t put off,” he said.

His dad shot him the look he perfected when Hunter was in high school and started fabricating in-service days to help with a behind-schedule job. “No girlfriend?” Hunter slid into the plastic seat and unwrapped his Whopper, giving his father his own narrow-eyed look.

“No girlfriend.”

“What about that girl you were dating, the one who worked the night shift at the casino? That worked out good for both of you.”

It was hard to find a woman who didn’t end up bitching about his hours. He had enough seniority to bid for a day shift if he wanted to, but he didn’t. Days were boring.

Overnights had the most action, but Hunter really liked the four-to-midnight shift because it was usually the busiest. Afternoon commute, events downtown at the convention center, then the harder action when criminal activity heated up around 31

nine-thirty, ten at night. Plus he didn’t have to worry about staying awake in the car.

Slow nights were worse than slow days.

He sucked down some Coke to clear the dust from his throat. “Shari? We broke up in the spring.”

“The nurse? Missy? Chrissy?”

“Alyssa. Broke up earlier in the summer.” She’d dumped him flat when a neurosurgery resident asked her out, but his dad didn’t need to know that detail.

“Anyone else your old dad should know about?”

Hunter peeled back the cover on the chipotle sauce and dipped an onion ring. “I’ve got a date Saturday. You might remember her. Lacey Meyers.”

“Real nice Colonial in Oak Grove,” his dad said, swiping a napkin at the mayo in the corner of his mouth. “I priced a kitchen job for her last year, February. She went with Walker. Her husband was in a real hurry to get the job done.” Hunter didn’t miss the emphasis on *her husband* or his dad’s raised eyebrows. “The husband’s out of the picture.”

“Just keeping an eye out for my boy,” he said, amusing the hell out of Hunter. He was two inches taller than his dad, outweighed him by twenty-five pounds and a uniformed cop, but his father still looked out for him. “She didn’t seem the type to fool around, either. Nice lady. Very apologetic when she called to tell me Dan could get her in right away.”

“She is nice,” Hunter said. *Polite as hell, in fact, all please and thank you and excuse me right up until she was dying to come. Then the demands and the claws came out.*

“How’d you meet her? On the job? You didn’t give her a speeding ticket, did you?”

“The bar last weekend,” Hunter said.

“That lady was in a bar? The time I met her to talk about the job she looked like Jackie Kennedy without the hat. Same smile, same type of suit.”

“She was at a bar,” Hunter confirmed. The grilling from his father had become pretty standard in the last year or so. His dad thought Hunter was alone too much.

Hunter thought he was just fine.

His father chewed for a minute. “The suit surprised me. I expected her to be wearing what every other doctor’s or lawyer’s wife in Oak Grove wears, those matching sweaters and slacks. I got the

impression she made more money than the husband did."

Hunter's head came up. He'd figured out Lacey wasn't like the rest of the women in Buff, but he'd assumed her house and her lifestyle were courtesy of a shark of a divorce lawyer and a part time job in real estate, to keep busy. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. He said something when I told her the cabinets would be thirty grand, minimum. 'Your money, your house, your choice' or something like that. She didn't bat an eye at the price or his attitude. Cool as a cucumber, she was." 32

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So Lacey's house and money didn't come from a great divorce settlement. Trust fund? Family money? "It's not my business anyway," Hunter said.

"Kind of looked like that kid behind the counter," his dad added. "Lawyer. Not a hair out of place, spit-shined shoes, kept checking his thingamajig—"

"BlackBerry."

"Yeah, while I was there," his dad said.

Hunter finished his sandwich and balled up the wrapper. If Lacey had been separated or divorced for fifteen months, a February meeting with his dad would have happened just before the separation, so maybe the ex was a prick because things were strained between him and Lacey. It was also a reminder of how little he really knew about the woman he was taking out.

"She's older than me," he said as his dad dipped the last of his fries in ketchup.

His dad's eyebrows, the tips white with drywall dust, went up. "I figured as much.

That's a problem?"

He shrugged. “She’s thirty-six.” The eight-year span wouldn’t be shrinking.

“Last time I checked, women didn’t come with expiration dates.” Hunter huffed in amusement, not all that surprised by his father’s take on the situation. By the time he was Hunter’s age his father was raising an eight-year-old and taking over his own father’s construction business. That forced maturity left him with no time or patience for bullshit.

When you weren’t looking for a relationship, the age difference, salary, cars, freaking roses in fireplaces, all of it was bullshit. If you were seeing someone for a good time, the only compatibility that mattered was sexual. He and Lacey were good there.

Real good. A week of thinking about her and he was ready for more.

So compatibility wasn’t an issue, but dinner was. He needed to work on that. Where the hell did you take a woman who dressed like Jackie Kennedy when she wasn’t wearing fuck-me shoes and ass-hugging jeans?

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Chapter Four

Promptly at seven p.m. Saturday Lacey opened her front door and sent up a silent prayer of thanks. A black car, low-slung and freshly washed, sat in the driveway, the engine popping as it cooled in the shade of her big oak tree. She turned her attention to Hunter.

“Hi,” she said, too speechless to smile. The man standing in front of her was yet another incarnation of the player and the athlete. Tonight he was dressed in khakis and a green button-down Oxford, with brown Doc Martens on his feet. He looked not all that different from any business casual banker she met while brokering a deal.

Except he radiated something indefinable she could only label as *presence*.

Underneath the “man picking up his date” surface simmered an awareness somehow sexual, protective and alert, all focused on her.

One eyebrow quirked up over the sunglasses. “Worried I’d pick you up on the bike?”

“I didn’t know if you drove anything else, which is silly in hindsight because you wouldn’t ride a motorcycle in the winter and—” She stopped herself and put on a welcoming smile. “Do you want to come in for a drink before we go?”

“Soda sounds good,” he said.

She halted her progress toward the liquor cabinet and made for the kitchen instead.

“I only have diet or iced tea.”

“I’ll take the tea,” he said. He closed the door behind him and removed his glasses.

“You look really nice.”

Pleased by the compliment, she smoothed down the softly pleated fuchsia silk skirt drawn in by a wide, braided brown leather belt at her waist. A crisp white cotton sleeveless shirt, flat brown sandals and her grandmother's gold hoop earrings completed the ensemble, which wasn't sexy by any stretch of the imagination. "Why, thank you."

In the kitchen Lacey poured out two glasses of tea from the pitcher in the fridge. "I make it sweet," she said. Hunter declined the sugar bowl. She opened the back door.

"Let's sit on the deck. It's warm in the sunroom this time of day." He braced himself against the railing, his eyes heavy-lidded and intense as he watched her kick off her sandals, settle herself onto a chaise and tuck her feet under the folds of her skirt. She offered him a quick smile, then felt the blush bloom on her cheeks at the frank interest in his eyes. "When you look at me like that I wonder if we're going to make it to the restaurant."

He set his glass on the railing and straddled the middle of the chaise, trapping her between the back and his big body as he reached for her bare, pedicured foot. "Would you mind?" he murmured, looking up from her instep as he asked, his thumbs digging rhythmically into the sole of her foot.

She rested her head against the back of the chaise and surrendered to the thick, sweet tendrils of desire sliding along her nerves. As the week passed she convinced herself that her memory played tricks on her, because the sex could not possibly have been as good as she remembered. The image of his face, savagely taut with restraint as he pounded into her, would eventually not send a jolt of anticipatory lust crashing through her pelvis. She'd done without for over a year. As she let more men into her bed the memories that dampened her panties daily would fade.

But the desire was back, thumping and surging. Each slow, attentive

stroke of his thumbs made her pulse pound in all the places she'd applied perfume before he knocked on her door. Behind her ears. The hollow of her throat. A light touch of the crystal bottle stopper between her breasts.

"You've been on my mind all week, beautiful. Not good for my concentration.

Dangerous, in fact," he said, his voice low and rough.

His fingers began to roam, up her calf, between her toes, but always returning to the arch of her foot and pressing hard enough to make her moan. She shifted her weight from her hip to her bottom and he took advantage, parting her legs to set one thoroughly massaged foot against his muscular thigh before picking up the other foot.

"I'm not that memorable," she demurred. Even smart, professional women traded on their looks, but Lacey knew her best asset was in her skull. Aside from her auburn hair, nothing about her physical appearance was anything more than tastefully elegant.

"That little noise you made when I hit your sweet spot was pretty memorable." The sweet spot fluttered to life at his very specific words. She remembered how shocked she'd been when she made that noise, how he'd throbbed inside her in response. She was watching his hands, but at this her eyes flickered up to see intent desire in his face.

"Very distracting," he finished.

It was so sexy to know he wanted her badly, yet held back. "It's up to me?"

"If it was up to me, beautiful, you'd be bent over the back of the sofa right now." His voice, still low and rough but now promising, added color and texture to the image his words conjured and sent a thrill skittering through her, hardening her nipples, softening her spine.

"Admirable restraint," she said. She might not know his middle name but she knew when he was utterly serious about taking her.

The last time, in her bed, she'd been on her forearms and knees, trembling and awash on waves of pleasure as he covered her and single-mindedly used the knowledge accumulated during three hours of sex to drive her to insanity and back. At the end of her last orgasm, he'd flipped her onto her back, braced his hands on either side of her head and surged into her. The unforgettable 35

intensity on his face as he let go and ruthlessly sought his own pleasure mesmerized her…and it wasn't there now.

"Heroic," he agreed. His hands stilled for a moment at the very tops of her thighs, his thumbs brushing rhythmically against the damp lace covering her swollen folds.

"This is a difficult decision," she managed to get out. The tease, his hands retreated to explore the sensitive skin behind her knees. She focused on his tanned fingers, long and rather deft despite their blunt tips, the nails trimmed almost to the quick. His caresses slowed and lengthened, massaging her calf and inner knee, hinting that with the slightest encouragement he'd go higher again.

"Why's that?" he asked, his gaze focused on her face.

"Dessert now," she began.

With the words, his hand did stroke up the inside of her leg, stopping just before the edge of her damp lace panties, then retreating down to safer territory.

This wasn't normal. She'd been on several dates since her divorce was finalized and none of them began with anything other than a drink and casual conversation before going to the restaurant or the theater. Yet in mere minutes Hunter had his hands up her skirt and every nerve ending in her body jumping in anticipation of more. No other man handled her so assuredly.

Different felt very, very good.

"Or?" he said, amusement flickering in his eyes.

What? Or what? Oh. “Dessert later. After dinner.” His eyelids drooped as his index fingers traced the elastic stretched over her hipbones. “No rules, beautiful. You can have *dessert* before, during and after dinner.” Her skirt now rode the tops of her thighs, his hard forearms dark against her pale, soft skin of her thighs. The position felt deliciously wanton, but she was, after all, in her backyard and while the dense summer foliage of the hundred-year-old oak trees obscured her rear neighbor’s house, anyone watching from windows on either side would see Hunter seducing her on the chaise. She slid her hands down her legs to push her skirt into a more respectable position.

His hands, now covered by her skirt, stopped hers just above her knees. The heat and strength of his hands radiated through the material. “Dinner first?” Her gaze flickered upward, through her lashes. “Dessert first, but inside. I have no desire to put on a show for my neighbors.”

“Having second thoughts after your parking lot debut?” He stood and held out a hand to help her to her feet. The silk of her skirt swished gently against her legs as she led him toward the door, her hand still clasped with his. He opened the door for her.

“No second thoughts, no regrets. I’m just not doing it again,” she said as she stepped through, then gasped in surprise and delight when he slammed the door closed. The sheer white curtains slid between her body and the window when he hoisted her to waist height and pinned her for a long, molten kiss.

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This heat, this shocking, thrilling heat was impossibly better than she remembered, as was the overwhelming urge to rub her breasts against his hard chest, her pelvis against his harder erection. No teasing or tantalizing in this kiss, seducing her into taking a risk with him, just pure, demanding male lust in the hard pressure of his mouth on hers, the thrust of his tongue.

Hunter pulled out one of the chairs neatly lined up under her kitchen table and spun her into it.

“Oh!” she said, but then his mouth was back on hers, taking advantage of the shocked sound to flick his tongue over the sensitive roof of her mouth. He knelt in front of her and shoved the fuchsia silk of her skirt to her hips.

“Lift,” he demanded, then slid her cream lace panties down to the floor.

Lacey widened her knees and reached for the buttons on his shirt while he dug in his pocket for his wallet and searched for a condom. His normally deft fingers fumbled while she quickly unfastened each button. She tugged his shirt free from his pants, spreading it wide to reveal the hard planes of his chest, then went to work on his belt buckle and zipper.

“Oh my,” she said when his erection sprang free, thick and demanding. She reached out to stroke it slowly up and down. He was steel covered in hot silk, the shaft a dark red, the tip wet in the late afternoon sunlight streaming into the kitchen. Lacey stroked and tugged, watching his face darken, his lips swollen and wet from her mouth.

“Slow up, beautiful,” he said, forcibly removing her hand.

“But I want to—“

“Later,” he said. “I need to be inside you.”

The words came out almost unwillingly. He didn’t look at her as he said them, focused as he was on rolling the condom down his shaft. She didn’t think she could get any wetter or more eager but her body responded to the suppressed urgency in his voice. She scooted forward to the very edge of the seat, the chair’s smooth oak now warm under her bare bottom, and gripped the wood with both hands.

He undid the buttons on her sleeveless blouse, flicked open the front catch of her bra and took her nipples between his thumbs and

forefingers, applying just enough pressure to send sensation coursing along her nerves and make her mouth go dry. His eyes roamed over her and for a brief moment, Lacey was aware of her provocative look.

Blouse open, Hunter's hands possessively caressing her breasts. Skirt to her hips, legs wide, the trimmed curls covering her mound a poor defense against the tanned, hard muscles of his torso, the bold thrust of his shaft.

Then he settled his mouth over hers. No teasing now, no patience either, just hard, hot kisses that spoke of a shockingly raw need. With one hand he nestled the tip of his cock in her folds and pushed. The slight sting of his penetration made her gasp. He stopped immediately, the head of his cock clasped just inside her channel, stretching her deliciously. Her eyes closed, her attention focused on the insistent pressure, the tingling nerves snapping and popping as she adjusted to his girth. She let her head drop 37

back, then shuddered as she felt his open mouth against her exposed neck and his tongue stroke along her pounding pulse.

"Ready for more?" The words came slow and hot in her ear.

She nodded.

"Show me. Put me in you."

Now he's got all the time in the world?

She braced her weight on one arm and reached out to trail her trembling fingers along his finely honed pectorals, down, down. Waves of heat and male musk radiated from him, his scent plain soap, no cologne. The muscles in his abdomen tightened, flexed as his breathing quickened under her touch. When she found his hipbone she gripped it and pulled him forward, inch by slow inch, until her nipples brushed his chest. Seated to the hilt, he pressed up against her clit and a firestorm ripped along her nerves.

A stifled, high-pitched whimper echoed in the stillness of her kitchen.

“Oh, fuck. That sound.”

He withdrew, stroked over that eager, sensitive spot inside her, and she made the sound again. He slid his hands between her wrists and her hips, finding his own purchase on the sturdy chair’s seat as he set an unrushed, firm rhythm that quickly had her quivering and grinding against him. Her hand fluttered up to the back of his neck, clasped his loose shirt, but she couldn’t find solid ground. He was moving as much as she was so she gave up, dropped her hand back to the chair’s seat and wantonly arched against him.

But even in the sharpest ecstasy she couldn’t keep herself from looking down at the erotic sight of his shaft gleaming with her juices as it plunged in and out of her sex. At Hunter’s sharply indrawn breath she looked up to catch him watching her as she watched *them*.

“Jesus, beautiful,” he muttered.

Lacey pressed her breasts to his chest, her clit to his pubic bone and sank into the riptide of pleasure drawing her into dark ecstasy. Hunter slid one hand into her hair to hold her open mouth to his, capturing her soft sobs as she hurtled to the edge of oblivion and over. Moments later he joined her, a guttural groan rumbling up from his chest as his cock throbbed and pulsed inside her.

She tore her mouth from his and gasped in air, her eyelids at half-mast as she stared into space. Her vision cleared, focusing on the tumble of fresh daisies in the fireplace.

Hunter’s breath came rough and fast in her ear as he rested his forehead on her shoulder. Slowly the tension eased from both their bodies.

“I wanted that,” he said, raw and rough.

“Me too,” she said. Her mind hadn’t been playing tricks on her. She’d felt consumed, desperate for his body and more than a little

shocked. Never would she 38

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have guessed a woman could long for a man so intensely. The poets were being, well, poetic.

But what was it? Lust? A physical connection unrelated to thought or emotion? At some level she marveled at her ability to feel so passionately for a man she barely knew.

Then again, maybe that lack of connection made that passion possible. No work issues, no late meetings, no social obligations, no emotional entanglements to distract her from amazing, previously untapped capacity for pleasure Hunter drew from her body.

He kissed her as he withdrew and Lacey let her trembling legs touch the floor again.

“Bathroom?” he asked as he got to his feet.

“Through the kitchen door, next door on your left,” she said. From behind he looked merely a little rumpled. She looked at the clock and covered her mouth to stifle her shocked laugh. It was seven-thirty.

She joined him in the bathroom as he finished buttoning his shirt and tucking the tails into his khakis. “I’ll just…clean up a little,” she said.

He gave her a crisp nod. When the door closed behind him, she dampened a cloth and made herself presentable, swiping the cool, damp fabric along her neck, then between her legs. A quick glance in the mirror revealed that whatever makeup the encounter removed was more than compensated for by the flush in her cheeks, her reddened lips and the satisfied look in her eyes.

“You are a new woman, Lacey,” she said.

She opened the door and found Hunter leaning against the back of the leather sofa, her cream lace panties hanging loosely from one

hand, her shoes in the other. His face utterly deadpan despite the humor dancing in his eyes, he held out her underwear. It was a bit ridiculous to step back into the bathroom to put her panties back on, so she held out her hand and kept her head high as she stepped into the skimpy bikinis.

“I locked the back door,” he said as she slid her feet into her sandals, but those were the only words he spoke until they were buckled into the black fabric seats of his car and backing out of the driveway.

“Well,” Lacey said, her voice bright in the silence. “Where are we going?”

“La Cucina on Columbus,” he said, his attention focused as he zipped through the side streets.

“I’ve never been there,” she said, her curiosity piqued. “Italian?”

“Mexican.”

Another silence descended. Succumbing to the satiated torpor humming in her veins, Lacey stared out the passenger window, a low-level hum of pleasure emanating from her skin as they drove through the thick early evening heat. A small smile tipped the corners of her mouth when she saw a new high-rise condo building going up on property for which she’d brokered the mortgage. The city’s eastern business district had fallen on hard times, but thanks to a dedicated community effort, new kinds of housing 39

and retail opportunities were opening up, bringing young professionals downtown to work, live and play. She was a big part of that process. Seeing the plans come to fruition made her happy.

Hunter’s face was once again impassive as he navigated the one-way streets downtown, his big hands barely seeming to touch the wheel or the gearshift as he drove. He gave her a quick glance, his eyes once again invisible behind the mirrored shades. A grin lifted the corner of his mouth. She smiled back.

Oh, this was nice, no chatter, no discussing acquaintances or mutual friends and mentally wondering what they'd say about the date. No unspoken question about "will we or won't we". They had. They would again.

He kept to the side streets, making a sharp left hand turn to enter the restaurant's parking lot from an alley at the rear of the building. The lot was almost empty, a few older cars with for sale signs parked facing the side street.

"You know the neighborhood," she commented. The older sections of town, built in the twenties and thirties, were rabbit warrens of alleys and streets. Even lifelong residents got lost.

"I was on patrol here for four years before I moved to the Northern precinct," he said as he unbuckled his seatbelt. "You learn the alleys and back streets real well when you're losing footraces with dealers and bangers." Far more motivating than being ten minutes late to a meeting. "Is this one of your favorite restaurants?" she asked.

"Never been, but I hear the food's good. Authentic." She picked up her purse and opened her own door, then smiled up at Hunter when he put his hand out to help her out of the very low-slung car. A little thrill zinged through her when he casually kept her hand in his, the gesture both sweet and protective as he led her around the corner of the building to the sidewalk.

The southeast side of the city, home to the bulk of the Hispanic population, enjoyed a thriving restaurant and nightlife traffic, but the revitalization was sketchy. Two blocks down a dozen men loitered on the sidewalk outside a strip club, while across the street in the next block people spilled down the front steps of a church. But Lacey recognized La Cucina's sign from a glowing restaurant review and photograph in the newspaper several months ago.

"I'm excited to try this place," she said as Hunter reached for the dulled brass handle. "The review I read was very complimentary—" The dark wood door thudded in its frame as the deadbolt caught. Hunter tried again but the door refused to budge. A horrified look flashed across his face.

Lacey cupped her eyes and peered through the window, now noticing a layer of dust on the curtains. There were no lights on inside. She pointed to the faded closed sign half-hidden behind two dusty white curtains in the window. Hunter blew out his breath, his hands on his hips.

She stood on tiptoe to peer over the curtains into the neighboring store that occupied space in the same building. “All the stores in this building are closed. Where are we?” she asked, searching for the street signs. “I’m not one hundred percent sure, but I think this building went on the market about a month ago. Business is booming on Columbus Street. This is a prime real estate opportunity.” Hunter stepped back and looked up and down the block. “I guess a good review doesn’t mean much anymore,” he said, running his hand over his hair. “Any ideas?” She turned to face the street, noting the five-and-dime stores, the brightly colored murals decorating the community center next to the church, and tried to think. “I’ve never eaten down here before,” she admitted.

“Not really your neighborhood,” he said, chagrin in his voice. He leaned back against La Cucina’s door, folded his arms and braced one foot against the wood paneling, then gestured to her silk skirt. “You were expecting SoMa,” he said, naming the city’s trendy shopping and dining district bounded by Sorrell and Madison, with brick streets, upscale boutiques and the city’s best local restaurants, “not Mexican on Columbus Street.”

“All I expected was to eat while getting to know you,” she said gently. “The location wasn’t important. And I’m a clotheshorse. It’s genetic and I can’t help it. If that’s a problem, then we’ll just have to eat in, naked.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he said absently, scanning the street. “Okay, your choice. We can go down to SoMa and try to get in at Libretto or Le Pain. Or we can go across the street and up a block to Juana’s.”

“Juana’s?”

“A dive where cops from the Southern go after shift.”

“Sounds great,” she said without hesitating. So far, *different* was working for her.

Besides, the chances of getting a table at eight o’clock on a Saturday night at the city’s two most popular restaurants were slim to none.

Juana’s was tiny, noisy and crowded with neighborhood residents clad in jeans and t-shirts and talking in rapid-fire Spanish. A small pack of boys fought over a toy and lurched between two Formica-topped tables filled with several generations of a family.

Behind the counter a small television broadcast a news program. Two of the cooks recognized Hunter when he walked in and shouted greetings through the window while waving metal spatulas. Hunter waved back, then cleared red plastic baskets and cups off the table in a red vinyl booth near the back, dumping the tableware into a gray tub near the door to the kitchen. Lacey slid into the seat and reached for the paper menu tucked between the napkin dispenser and the white wall.

“Don’t bother,” he said. “You get tacos at Juana’s.” She put the menu back. “Tacos it is.”

The waitress swabbed down the table, nodding while Hunter ordered two taco platters and a Coke. Lacey asked for a wine list and got a shake of the head and a nervous laugh.

“No liquor license,” Hunter said.

“Diet Coke,” she said. The necessities completed, she met Hunter’s gaze across the table and saw a hint of nerves there.

“So having slept with a woman doesn’t ease the first date jitters?”

His shoulders relaxed as he looked at her, something at once dark and full of humor in his eyes. “Depends on the woman. Is this another first for you?”

“Besides the first time I’ve had sex in my kitchen, our first date and my first time at Juana’s? No. I’ve been on other dates since the divorce was finalized.” She unwrapped the paper napkin from around the silverware. “But it felt strange to date men my ex-husband, Davis, worked or golfed with.”

“That’s why you were in Buff,” he said. “Not too many lawyers there.”

“Or bankers, or doctors,” she said. “Davis and I began dating when we were nineteen and married at twenty-two. Neither of us liked to party. When I told you I hadn’t danced in ages, that was a half-truth. I’d never danced in a club before.”

“You didn’t go out in college?” he asked, curiosity in his voice. “I partied as much as I studied.”

“The opportunities were there, but Davis was a scholarship student and very ambitious. I’m—” She stopped as the waitress left two red plastic glasses filled with soda and ice, then back at into his eyes, unable to stop the embarrassed smile crossing her face. “After college we married immediately and I was working sixty, sometimes seventy hours a week for Western States Bank.”

He studied her. “You don’t seem like you’d have to take a job where you work that much.”

He’d been right about her attitude at Buff and he was right about whether or not she needed to work. But the pastimes chosen by most of her peers—decorating and charity fundraising—held no interest for her when compared to the thrill of the hunt and the visceral satisfaction of a long-fought, hard-won deal.

“I like to work,” she said, then reached across the table for one of his large hands, determined to change the subject. Her hands spanned an octave at the piano but seemed tiny in comparison to his long fingers and broad, callused palms. She turned one hand

over so it rested palm-down in hers, then traced the assortment of fresh scabs and bruises that covered the knuckles and the back of his hand.

“I didn’t notice these earlier.” *Because thirty seconds after you walked in my door you had your hands up my skirt.* “Is this what happens when you can’t concentrate?” His eyes met hers, completely bland. “It’s what happens when a meth addict takes off after a traffic stop.”

She cocked her head and looked at him, intrigued by the change in his demeanor.

Just like that, he’d gone from reserved but relaxed to humming with energy and about two sizes bigger than he was before. “There’s more to that story.” 42

Liberating Lacey

“I pulled him over for expired plates and saw drugs and paraphernalia in the passenger seat. He took off when I ordered him out of the car. Me and six other officers ended up searching the gully on the east side of Memorial Park in the dark. We called in the chopper to find him with FLIR, the infrared cameras. He put up a fight when we found him. The bushes weren’t real friendly, either.”

“I’d hate to see what he looks like,” she said, gently rubbing the skin around the scabs.

“Not too bad. It was Tase him or hurt him pretty bad to get him cuffed. I Tased him.

People high on meth feel no pain, don’t care if they live or die, or if you live or die.” He looked at her, his eyes gone forest green, and something very, very feminine submerged inside her surged to life. “Gonna kiss my boo-boos and make ‘em all better?”

“I’ll kiss something that will make you forget the pain,” she said. “But not your boo-boos.”

His fingers closed tight around hers, but they broke apart when the gum-smacking waitress thumped two taco platters and sodas in cans

down on the table. Saliva filled Lacey's mouth as she surveyed the assortment of hard- and soft-shell tacos.

"I'm starving," she said as she reached for a hard-shell taco and the side of guacamole.

The food was good, filling, well seasoned and unpretentious. She sat cross legged on the booth seat and ate taco after taco, eventually disdaining the flimsy paper napkins for licking her fingers as Hunter gave her short answers to her questions about his job.

The sun set, the street lights came on, the waitress changed the television channel to a soccer game. Traffic outside picked up as teenagers began cruising and the families left to put kids to bed. Lacey drank another Diet Coke and didn't miss how effectively and persistently Hunter deflected attention back to her.

"What exactly is a commercial mortgage broker? Is it like a real estate agent?" The question was casually framed in the context of their conversation when she brought up the available building across the street.

"I help buyers arrange financing on large-scale projects," she said. "Basically, if you set out to buy enough land to build a strip mall or an apartment complex, you can't just walk into your branch bank and get a loan. You need a commercial mortgage and those deals have far more negotiability than a regular mortgage."

"So you don't work for a real estate company."

"I work on commission, making a percentage of the property sale price. The bigger the deal, the more I make. I started out at Western States, made some connections, learned the basics of the business, then went into business for myself when they got out of that market. No, thank you," she said as he offered her one of the remaining tacos. "I really enjoyed the meal, though."

"Glad you liked it," he said, stretching one arm along the back of the booth. "Is there much of a market for that?"

"Absolutely," she said. "Suburban expansion means strip malls and office complexes. I handled most of the financing for the buildings along Hanover Street over the last five years. Investors buy and sell those properties after the structures are built, too."

The bell over the door dinged, as it had all evening when customers came and went, and as it had all evening, Hunter's gaze flickered over her shoulder to check out the new arrivals. Rather than assessing and dismissing, however, this time he gave a short nod and lifted a hand. A moment later three men in street clothes with guns and badges on their belts came to stand by the edge of the booth.

Hunter handled the introductions after casual greetings. "Lacey Meyers, meet Officers Tom High, Nat Johnson and Dave Masters. I used to work with them at the Southern."

A little self-conscious, she uncrossed her legs and put her feet on the floor. Tom and Dave turned their attention to the soccer game, but Nat, short and compact with thinning blond hair, focused on her with the same direct stare Hunter used.

"You look familiar."

He didn't. She frowned and sorted through her memory. "I'm sorry…" she began but he cut her off.

"I worked security at the Memorial Hospital fundraiser. You were there, working the registration table."

"You have a very good memory for faces. There were five hundred people at that event," she said with a smile. Her mother had chaired the annual fundraiser, raising almost half a million dollars for the pediatric oncology department.

"I never forget a redhead. It took me a second to place you without the ball gown and the fancy hairdo."

She felt her eyes narrow, her more formal smile replace the genuine one she'd offered earlier. Her mother, who believed the best defense

was a good offense when it came to stifling gossip, had loaned her the gorgeous black Valentino dress and given her a position where she'd hand a nametag to everyone attending the party, her bare ring finger prominently visible. Like Cinderella at the ball, Lacey had been swamped with offers for drinks, dances, a little something from the buffet. She'd gone home with a dozen business cards and called none of them.

"People do like an excuse to dress up," she said, and if her voice was a little frostier than before, well, perhaps Nat would get the hint.

"What's a society babe like you doing with this loser?" Hunter went very, very still.

"Having dinner." She looked over her shoulder at the counter where three taco platters waited in the window. "Your food's ready," she said, meeting his nasty grin with her own stone cold look, and turned back to Hunter.

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Liberating Lacey

"Come on," Dave said, looking back for the first time from the soccer game. "I gotta hurry. I've been late three nights this week and my wife's getting pissed. Don't be a stranger, Anderson."

"Nice," Hunter said as the officers collected their food and found stools at the counter. "You held your own with one of the department's biggest pricks."

"I have a few tricks up my sleeve when it comes to handling people," she said lightly.

"Scary."

"I use my powers only for good."

She didn't get the grin she'd been trying for. Hunter leaned forward, his mouth set in a firm line. "What exactly are you doing with me,

Lacey?"

"Having dinner," she said, her tone softer, more intimate. "Trying to get to know you. I'm not doing so well. You're very good at deflecting questions." He didn't deny it. "This doesn't make any sense to me."

"I like you. Surely I'm not the first woman in this city to enjoy your company."

"You must know bankers or lawyers who don't golf with your ex." She almost laughed. "Don't underestimate Davis's drive to network. What about you? Wouldn't you rather be at Buff, choosing dessert from a tasty selection of young, beautiful women?"

Slow and sure, he shook his head, the heat back in his green eyes. Funny…she knew exactly what he was thinking without him saying a word.

She tucked her hair behind her ears to settle her nerves, then met his gaze head on.

"I'm not looking for Mr. Right, Hunter, but I'm also not the kind of woman who will go through a series of Mr. Right-For-Nows, either. Until you, there hasn't been much spontaneity in my life. I've liked trying new things, my 'firsts' with you. As long as we're both where we want to be…is that enough?"

She wasn't asking for a commitment, although she'd prefer an exclusive relationship for the duration of their time together. But for Hunter, clearly very capable of being footloose and fancy free, that might even be too much.

He reached across the table and captured her wrist, his fingers easily encircling the slender bones. When her palm was face-up in his, he traced her life line then her love line, over and over again.

"This is where you want to be, beautiful?"

She drew in breath, her fingers flexing as hot tingles lingered in the wake of his motion. "Does Juana serve dessert?"

“No.”

“Then I’d like to go home and have dessert in the sun porch, because the carpet’s really soft in there.” She let the words, almost inaudible over the roar of the soccer game, drift into the heated, trembling air between them.

“What does soft carpet have to do with dessert?” As if he didn’t know. The desire in his eyes turned them the shade of a stormy green sea she could drown in.

“Fifteen years of ballet lessons made my knees a bit stiff,” she said, keeping her eyes focused demurely on her slim, pale hand in trustingly his.

The fingers of the hand holding hers tightened very briefly, the finger tracing figures in her palm stopped its hypnotic movements for just a moment. “Your knees.” She didn’t look up. “Yes. I’m more comfortable with a little cushioning underneath them. I do so hate to impose on you to suffer through all these firsts with me—“ His index finger left off tantalizing her palm to tip up her chin. Hot male prerogative mixed with incredulity on his face. “Was missionary the *only* way you had sex?”

“No,” she said. “No, but I don’t think I’m very good…at that, and I didn’t…well….he never asked and I never offered.”

“But you are now.”

She nodded, anticipation and nerves warring inside her. This series of firsts would be easier if he ran the show, did what he liked and pulled her along in his wake. But asking for what she wanted, feeling fairly confident she’d get it but maybe not, just maybe, made her insides hum with an unfamiliar need.

“Your ex was very polite,” he said in an amused tone of voice that translated loud and clear into *what a moron.*

“Very.” Politically correct, in fact. When it became clear their relationship was on rocky ground, Lacey made some tentative efforts to spice up their sex life. All were tactfully rebuffed.

A little more different, please…

Hunter still had her wrist in an unbreakable grip, like she might bolt if given the chance to rethink her offer. “Let me get this straight. I take you to a dive of a Mexican diner for dinner and question you like you’re a witness. In return you want to give me a blow job.”

“Well, if you put it that way,” she said, mock displeasure in her voice. One side of his mouth curled up in response to her teasing. “Please,” she said.

He blew out his breath. “Hell, yes.”

“Still where you want to be?” she asked teasingly as she watched him toss a couple of bills on the table. She expected him to say he would be when they got back to her house, or if she’d start early, in the car. Once again, he surprised her.

“Beautiful, I’ve been right where I wanted to be all night.” Then he kissed her, the kind of purposeful, intense kiss a man uses to claim a woman, in full view of Juana, her customers and the three cops from his former precinct. “But you’re not off the hook.”

* * * * *

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Liberating Lacey

Time really does stand still, Hunter thought, when the molten residue of pleasure slackened his body and ebbed from his brain.

Lacey sat on her heels between his spread legs, her head resting against his thigh.

His hand wasn’t quite steady when he reached down to caress her

hair, his sweaty fingers clinging to the fine strands. She made a soft noise of protest, the first of the evening.

“Shhhh,” he said, not even sure what the noise meant. He didn’t trust his arms to pull her into his lap, so he slid off the chair, landing beside her on the carpet. He wrapped both arms around her and pulled her head down to his shoulder. “Shhhhh.

Okay. It’s okay.”

Was he reassuring her, or himself?

Streetlights filtering through the leaves of the big oaks that towered over Lacey’s property provided erratic illumination in the sunroom. She’d led him there, stopping before an overstuffed chair next to the fireplace. Then she waited, a half-smile on her face, as he thought about how he wanted to handle this. She knew the mechanics of a blowjob, obviously, had licked and sucked him with an eager enthusiasm their first night together, so this wasn’t about how. This was about making it good. For him.

So he said nothing that wasn’t a command.

Undress me.

The buttons of his shirt, his belt and zipper, with no help from him. He savored the light caress of her palms as she slid his shirt from his shoulders, slipped her hands into his boxer briefs to urge his pants to the floor, then knelt at his feet to take off his socks and shoes. When he was naked, he settled back into the chair and looked at her, doing his damnedest to keep his face neutral, keep the admiration and desire hidden.

She was fully dressed. He was naked, achingly erect, but there was no doubt who was running this show. He pointed at the floor between his spread knees.

Lick. Use the flat of your tongue first.

She claimed to be a novice but there was nothing tentative in the first stroke of her tongue from base to tip. He closed his eyes and let sensation slither along his nerves, pool in his groin like the silky fire

of her hair, illuminated in his lap by a ragged patch of streetlight. The soft waves had driven him crazy all night, hiding a cheekbone, an eye, With every touch of her pale hand in the dark fire of her hair he wanted to replace her hand with his own.

Her hair a tantalizing shroud around her face, she did exactly what he told her. No more, the witch. If she kept playing like this, by the end his “orders” would thinly disguised begging.

Take off your blouse.

Fancy lace half-cups the exact creamy shade of her skin offered up the lush fullness of her breasts and barely hid her hard nipples. Lacey might be inexperienced, but her taste in lingerie made him reach for her head, guide her down.

Suck. Gently, just the tip.

Fuck, fuck. Breathe. Gotta make this last, even as the wet heat of her mouth threatened to incinerate his control. They were just getting started.

He took her bra off, because she was on her knees for him and he wanted to, then leaned forward to kiss her, play with her nipples, until she was panting, straining into his hands. The hotter the girl, the better the blowjob. Her turn would come.

Relax…relax your throat, yeah, just like that.

Just. Like. That. Slowly. Get used to it. There’s no rush. Ah, fuck yeah. So deep. So fucking good.

Stand up. Take off your skirt. Turn. Again.

Leave the scrap of cream lace panties on because they’ll look so fine, so delicate and elegant on your sweet little ass while you’re blowing me.

Kneel again and practice. Wrap your fist around the base…up and down, with your mouth.

Nice and wet, like that. Let it build.

A very diligent student, so attentive to her work.

He let his head list, gripped the chair's back behind his head with one hand, cupped her head with the other and thrust. All thought ended when the orgasm exploded at the base of his spine and seared its way up his shaft. Last month he'd been on scene when the Fire Department struggled to contain a fast-burning blaze. The licking flames greedily consumed everything inside the building, then, almost as an afterthought, brought the walls and roof down, effectively demolishing the building from the inside out. That was how thoroughly Lacey pleasured him. Destroyed him.

He was so far gone he didn't remember asking if she was okay, or warning her before he came in her mouth. He'd never lost his mind, used a woman like that before.

But he never forgot it was Lacey on her knees, Lacey capitulating to his every demand.

Lacey now trembling against him.

"Are you…?" The sentence got lost in the thickness in his throat. He coughed, ready to try again but she cut him off.

"Hunter," she whispered. The pleading in her voice nearly buried him. "Hunter, please, I need—"

So polite. He slid his hand into her lace panties and found her swollen, drenched folds, ending any worries she might have been merely going along with what just happened. Her longing moan echoed in his ears as he pushed three fingers into her slippery cleft and pressed the base of his thumb against her clit. With surprising strength she clasped the nape of his neck and turned his mouth to hers for a hot, desperate, hard kiss. He pressed against her clit, her thighs clenching and releasing around his wrist, until she tossed her head back and whimpered in time to the convulsions squeezing his

fingers.

Okay then.

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Liberating Lacey

Time once again stretched out as they sat in a tangled mess on the floor, her head against his shoulder, his legs stretched out parallel to the fireplace, one arm wrapped around her waist, the other cupping the damp curls covering her mound. Eventually he stood, waited a moment to see if his knees would hold him, then shouldered through the French doors into the kitchen. He washed his hands and got a glass of orange juice for Lacey.

He hunkered down again and offered it to her. A smile curved her lips as she accepted, making a face as she initially sipped the juice, then drinking it all. He held his hand out for the empty glass.

“More?” His voice sounded foreign in the stillness of her sun porch.

She shook her head, simply looking at him. For the first time in their relationship he flushed under her gaze. He hoped it was hidden in the pale darkness, but he didn’t look away, half-shocked by what he’d done, half-Neanderthal and proud of it. But as the seconds passed he forgot to be embarrassed. Her rosy cheeks, her swollen lips, her glassy, satisfied brown eyes fascinated him. He’d never seen a woman look more satiated, a small, knowing smile on her face, like she knew a secret. A secret about him.

One he didn’t even know.

“What is it about you?”

The words were out, far too telling, before he even formed the thought. He would have given almost anything to take them back.

But she didn’t jump all over them, just shrugged with the same satisfied smile.

“Bed,” she said.

That he could handle. He set the glass down on a side table and hoisted her into his arms.

“I can walk,” she pointed out, the languor in her voice making a lie of her words.

“But I’ll carry you.”

Once upstairs, he set her on her chaise while he pulled back the sheets, then lifted her again and set her in the bed. She snuggled down into the sheets while he slid in and curled up behind her.

Her voice was faint, the muscles in her hip limp under his hand when she asked,

“That’s how you like those?”

Lacey’s quaint euphemisms amused him but tonight, after his prim little society babe turned his skin inside out, he felt a newfound appreciation for “lady in the parlor, whore in the bedroom”.

“Yeah. They’re all good, but…yeah. Next time I’ll make it better for you.” Next time, when he knew what to expect, could steel himself against the onslaught. Jesus. If she even gave him a next time.

“That was fine for me.”

Her voice was relaxed, easy, no pressure. Balanced. As if she didn’t mind him rough, but didn’t expect it, either. His little experimenter, checking it all out, taking it all in. If she liked to play that way, they could have a hell of a lot of fun.

While it lasted, the distant voice in his mind reminded him.

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Chapter Five

Lacey shouldered her laptop bag and made her way to the front door, digging for her keys in the purse hanging from the crook of her arm as she walked. Her beloved house, built by her grandfather for her grandmother as a wedding present, had only one tiny flaw—a detached single-car garage. She often entered the house through the mudroom across the driveway from the garage, but the landscapers had rather effectively blocked that door with an enormous load of mulch. A few weeds sprouted in the flowerbeds lining the front porch. A lawn care company handled the mowing and tree work, but working in the gardens brought back fond memories of spring planting and fall covering, time spent with her grandmother.

She'd kept the house in the divorce. Once, just once, in a meeting to divide their assets, Davis had talked about going after it, despite the fact that her name and her name only was on the deed. She'd asked their respective lawyers to give them a minute, then spoken to Davis in a very low, very calm tone of voice. Ninety seconds later the lawyers were back and the house was off the table. Her property before the marriage, just like her trust fund. No need to discuss further.

Her heels clacked against the two wooden steps to the wide porch that ran the length of the front of her house. In the porch's shade the air was cooler than along the sidewalk. A colleague cancelled a late afternoon meeting, ostensibly to pick up his son at school but more likely to get in a round of golf on one of the remaining nice days of the year. Home early for a change, and on a Friday, no less, she'd make herself a glass of lemonade and sit on the porch swing to go through the mail and watch her neighbors come home, rather than being the last person on the street to end her work day. She really needed to think about something for dinner, maybe baking a piece of salmon, or perhaps just a quick tabbouleh salad and some French bread…

“Hey, beautiful.”

The familiar voice startled her in the process of inserting the key into the lock of her solid oak front door. She swung around, her laptop bag dropping from her shoulder to catch in the crook of her arm. “Hunter?”

Her surprise made him pause, one foot on the front porch, the other behind him on the step. Lacey’s jaw dropped. Dressed in full uniform, the male body that seemed sufficiently impressive in jeans and t-shirts simply took her breath away. Tall and imposing, his muscular chest seemed even broader in dark navy blue.

He took her speechlessness for welcome and came to stand beside her. “I figured between the cruiser and me saying your name twice you’d hear me.” She looked toward the street and saw a police car parked on the street in the shade of her oak tree. “Lost in thought. I need to weed and mulch those beds, but it looks like 51

rain so I won’t get to that this weekend. I thought you were working a double shift today,” she said.

He’d called a couple of times and met her for a coffee at La Java when she had a free hour one afternoon, the only time that worked for both of them in the last week and a half. The conversation, casual and easy, had ended with a kiss so thorough she hadn’t dared reapply her lipstick. Her lips were so swollen and pink from the pressure of his mouth that adding anything other than gloss would have broadcast exactly how her coffee meeting ended.

He reached for the bags, dangling uselessly from her arm. “Dinner break,” he said succinctly. “I saw you cross Hanover and took a chance you were coming home early.

Mind that I just showed up?”

She jammed her key into the lock and opened the door, stepping into the cool darkness of her foyer. “Of course not. Come in. I was about to make some lemonade, if you want some,” she said,

heading straight for the kitchen, her heels clicking against the polished mahogany flooring, then silenced by the runner, then tapping more softly against the slate floor of her kitchen.

“Sounds good,” he said as he lined her bags up on the granite-topped island.

The words *dinner break* flashed into her head. “Would you rather have something to eat instead?”

He shook his head, his green eyes smiling a pleasure in seeing her that didn’t make it to his mouth. She now knew him well enough to know his eyes were the only real indicator of his emotions, as he kept his face under strict control…unless he was making love. He shrugged a little, the movement automatic as he adjusted the gear on his belt.

The radio hooked to his shoulder crackled faintly and he turned it down. “No, thanks.

I’ll get something later. I wanted to hang with you.” Hang out? Was that some kind of Gen Y code-speak for a late afternoon booty call?

She’d met Claire for coffee over the weekend. Her friend’s opinion about Hunter inviting her out on dates was that it was fine but Lacey needed to keep sex with him happening on her terms, not his. Claire claimed this was simple self-defense against a player. Lacey found it ruthless. If she didn’t feel like having sex with Hunter, she’d say so.

Giving up on decoding what may or may not have been slang, she decided to take him at face value and got out the lemons, the juicer, the cutting board and her best knife. “I hardly recognized you in your uniform,” she said over her shoulder.

“Same here,” he said. “Very classy.”

The compliment earned him a flashing smile over her shoulder as she worked. She wore a black and white houndstooth suit, professional armor with couture style. Her brain might be her best asset, but a feminine cut to her clothes and a nice set of heels

helped disarm all but the most rigid opponents. “I wasn’t kidding when said I was a clothes horse.”

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She pressed the exposed meat of several lemons into the spinning juicer and watched as the reservoir fill, adding water and lots of sugar because she liked her lemonade sweetly tart, not tartly sweet, then poured the lemonade into two glasses. She offered him one, but drew it back before he could take it. At his surprised look she tipped her head up to him and pursed her lips just a bit.

“Right,” he said and gave her a quick, warm kiss.

She handed him the glass, took a sip of her own drink and stared unabashedly at the broad-shouldered, uniformed police officer holding a glass of lemonade in her kitchen. Giving in to curiosity, she nodded at his belt. “What exactly is all that stuff?” He downed the lemonade in two swallows and refilled the glass at the fridge before answering. “Hot today,” he said by way of explanation, then gave her a slow, thorough once-over before he lifted his chin toward the laptop bag sitting on the island. “What’s in the bag?”

“The usual,” she said.

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” he said. Then he winked.

Lightening flashed through her and her nipples hardened under layers of silk and lace. She didn’t care if this was a late afternoon booty call or not. The mail could wait.

What could be more *different* than exploring the mystery of a uniformed cop?

“Deal,” she said.

Her bag hefted over his shoulder, he took her hand and led her into the living room. The bag landed at one end of her brown leather

sofa and he dropped down on the middle cushion.

“C’mere.”

Apparently this wouldn’t be a Powerpoint presentation with slides and informational diagrams, but rather a hands-on learning experience.

She rucked her skirt up and straddled his lap, the position pushing her skirt to mid-thigh. Rough, thick polyester scudded against her silk stockings as she clasped his hips with her knees and braced her bottom against his thighs. He settled both hands on her bottom, then used his foot to scoot her coffee table back a few inches.

“You first,” she said, but took the initiative and pointed at the holster digging into her left knee.

Without taking his eyes from her face he withdrew his gun from the holster on his hip. “.45 caliber Glock. The clip,” he said offhandedly, manipulating the weapon so what she assumed was the “clip” dropped out. He shoved it back in with a solid thunk and pulled two more rectangular metal objects off his belt. “Spare clips.” He didn’t offer it to her. She didn’t ask.

“The obvious one,” she said, feeling her eyes widen just a bit. “Why did you become a police officer? Your father has more than enough work for you to join him in the business.”

“I’m not cut out for the same shit, different day,” he said. “No nights are the same. I like being first on a scene, then moving on to whatever’s coming next. We’re usually pretty busy with 9-1-1 calls but if it’s a slower night, there’s always traffic stops. I never know what’s coming when I get in the car. That can be bad, but most of the time it’s good.”

His words rang with a flat honesty she appreciated. “Fair enough,” she said, then reached for her laptop bag. “My MacBook Air.

Lightweight and easy to use. I do a lot of presentations, but I'm not very tech savvy."

He hefted it. "What's in it?"

"My entire professional career. Every photograph, every presentation, every contract, every bit of research I've ever done on every property I've ever bought, sold, or investigated."

"What about data, if it's stolen?"

"I back it up, twice a day, to both off-site and on-site servers." He set the laptop down beside him, but before she could pick out another mysterious item from his belt he leaned forward just enough to kiss her. Heat radiated from his lips to hers, softening and opening her mouth. He flicked his tongue just inside her lips, then sat back and held out a leather case.

"Handcuffs," he said.

Oh. Her mind went blank as she automatically reached for what he offered, fingering the smooth, worn leather case, turning it over. Her heartbeat rocketed from a slow, heated thump to a rabbit's pace and a flush crept up her cheeks.

"I wear them behind my back so I can get to them with either hand," he said, his voice half an octave lower than normal.

She nodded sagely, as if that practical consideration jibed with her own experiences, except none of her experiences included handcuffs. "Pretty sneaky. I thought you wanted to kiss me."

"I did. I do," he said. He slid one hand up over the back of her suit to cup the nape of her neck. The proprietary grip of his hand worked in tandem with his mouth to seduce her, the merest hint of pressure of his lips over hers, their quick breaths mingling more than their tongues. She braced both hands on his chest, the fingers of her right hand clasped around the handcuffs case, then pulled back in surprise. Hunter's chest was muscular and firm, but not rock hard.

"What's…?"

He smiled and shook his head. “Your turn,” he said, a hint of command in his voice.

“Your stuff’s more interesting,” she said.

“Not to me,” he replied, caressing the exposed length of her leg with one warm hand.

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Liberating Lacey

She tossed the cuffs case next to her briefcase and dug in her purse until she found her BlackBerry. “I’m an addict,” she said as he looked at it then set it on the sofa. “My mother thinks I need a twelve-step program.”

This time he pursed his lips. “You don’t check it when I’m around,” he said as he picked up her hand and pressed a kiss into her palm, then the fleshy base of her thumb.

She didn’t. The weekend she brought him home was the first weekend in months, maybe years, she hadn’t compulsively checked the BlackBerry. She’d forgotten about it.

Not surprisingly, the world did not come to an end. Except it had… in her bed. Again and again. The night he took her out she hadn’t even brought it out of her purse.

Another first.

“Other things on your mind?” he asked when she didn’t respond.

She nodded, the heat in his eyes making her heart thump against her ribcage.

“Good. You work pretty hard, beautiful, but all work and no play makes Lacey a dull girl.”

She didn’t feel dull right now. Pressed up against him, her lips tingling from his brief kisses and aching for more, her nipples hard

for his touch, she felt like she was glowing, incandescent with heat and light, as if her outline would be visible in the darkness.

“Your turn,” she said.

He spread his hands palm up, leaving his chest open to her touch. He wore a short-sleeved shirt. She trailed the tips of her fingers along the hard muscles of his forearms, up over the bulge of his biceps, to touch his nametag and badge, then across where she usually felt the firm muscle and satiny skin of his deltoid and pectoral. Instead, raised ridges and the hard edge of something covering his chest stopped her questing hands.

She began to undo the buttons of his dark blue polyester shirt, one by one, down his chest and upper abdomen, the scent of Hunter and clean sweat rising as she opened the shirt. She reached his belt and stopped, spreading the fabric wide to expose a black vest, secured around his torso with wide Velcro straps.

Silence cocooned them but with this item the grandfather clock in her foyer intruded into her consciousness, ticking through five seconds before he spoke. “Bullet resistant vest. They’re hot, they’re heavy, they’re uncomfortable when you’re sitting in the car and no patrol cop in this town goes on duty without one.”

“Resistant?” She thought they were bullet *proof*, not resistant.

“Cop-killers will get through them. Some rifle bullets, too.” Her eyes zipped up to his. “Exactly how safe are you on the job?” He laughed a little, a gleam in his eyes as he slid his hands up and down ever so slightly over her hips, a motion she found both soothing and arousing. She suspected he knew exactly how his touch made her feel. “Not as safe as you are, but we’re trained to handle situations so we go home alive.”

“Really?”

“Really. Think of the vest as insurance. Probably never need it, but you gotta have it.”

“Good,” she said, then hooked one finger under the Velcro running over his left shoulder. “I want this off.”

Chagrin crossed his face. “Lacey, I’m soaked with sweat. I spent the last hour in ninety-five degree heat at an accident scene.”

“I don’t care, Hunter.” She really didn’t. Assuming he had an hour, about forty minutes remained.

“I’ll ruin your sofa.”

“Body oill is good for leather.” She tugged at the Velcro and heard the distinctive rip of the material separating.

“All right…wait! Not that way. I’ve got those straps tightened just right.” He leaned forward and she helped him shrug out of his shirt. It pooled around his waist, caught by his belt. With deft movements he unfastened the Velcro holding the sides of the vest together and pulled it away from his body to drop on her antique Persian carpet.

His white t-shirt fit snugly to his chest and was indeed soaked with sweat. Her mouth, on the other hand, went dry at the sight of his carved musculature under the clinging wet T. She took the damp fabric in either hand, tugged the shirt free of his pants and pulled it over his head to land on the floor next to his vest.

Gingerly he leaned back into the sofa, relaxing only when she pushed on his shoulders. Small, tight masculine nipples, darker brown in the tanned expanse of his chest, tempted her to taste. Lapping at the tiny buds made his grip on her hips tighten.

In response her own nipples began to throb against the lace and silk of her bra.

“Your turn, beautiful,” he said, his voice a dark rasp.

The heat and strength of his erection, pushing firmly against the zipper of his navy pants, made it very hard to lift her head and focus, but she reached into the bag and pulled out her calculator.

“It runs complex financial calculations. Your turn.” He removed a black cylinder from his belt. “OC spray. You know it as Mace.”

“Claire carried that on her key ring until she sprayed herself in the eye one night at a bar.”

“It burns,” he said matter-of-factly.

“You’ve been Maced?”

“In the Academy.” He reached for another device on his belt. “Tased, too. The department won’t let you carry a Taser unless you take the class and you can’t take the class unless you agree to be Tased.”

“My God.” She handled the pepper spray gingerly and declined with a shake of her head to touch the Taser. “Did they shoot you, too?” she asked, only half-joking.

He took both items from her and set them in the growing pile of gear on her end table, next to her pretty Wedgwood plate and her Tiffany lamp. “You’re down two, beautiful.”

“I don’t carry anything else in my bags. Just project files.”

“So let’s talk about your uniform.”

Her brow furrowed. “What uniform?”

He traced one finger up the buttons holding her jacket closed, then gently touched her grandmother’s emerald brooch nestled in her left lapel. “I’m not the only one wearing a uniform. Mine says I’m Officer Anderson, no stripes, no clusters, no bars, just a guy working the street.” He retraced his path, flicking open the buttons from her breasts to her waist. “Yours says you’re Ms. Lacey Meyers, successful businesswoman.” She hadn’t thought about it that way. She was about to stop thinking at all as she watched his dark hands

spread open her jacket to expose her blouse.

“Tell me about this suit, Lacey,” he said as he slid the jacket off her shoulders. The heat of his palms seared through the thin white silk at her shoulders, his hands large enough so his thumbs almost touched at the hollow of her throat.

“It’s Oscar de la Renta,” she said as he began to stroke her collarbones, the silk quickly warming as it rasped ever-so-gently against her sensitized skin. “Houndstooth.

Alpaca and wool.”

“Doesn’t mean anything to me,” he said. She watched his fingers move to the bone buttons of her blouse and begin to undo them, one by one. “But you look gorgeous in your businesswoman’s uniform. Sexy and untouchable all at the same time.”

“I could say the same for you,” she said, the words coming out as the merest whisper when he pushed the blouse down her arms. Four delicate, fabric-covered buttons held the cuff snug against her wrist. She waited docilely as he deftly unbuttoned first one sleeve, then the other. Dressed in what was left of his uniform she caught a glimpse of how the cop informed the man; he handled her body with a presumption that sent jagged shards of heat flashing through her.

“I look sexy and untouchable?” His eyes were teasing, flashing green as he studied her breasts, supported by taupe silk and ecru lace.

“Police officers always look untouchable to me, distant and authoritative,” she said.

“We’re supposed to.” He stretched his arms along the back of her sofa, his eyes heavy-lidded and promising. “For you, beautiful, I’m touchable, too.” It was the invitation she’d been waiting for. She leaned forward and kissed him.

Their mouths melded with a raw, embarrassing lack of finesse and when she broke away Hunter’s lips was swollen, wet. His eyes still

closed, he leaned forward, as if tracking her withdrawing mouth.

She lifted her hand to press down on his lips with her thumb. His eyes slid open, intent desire evident in the darkening irises. When his gaze met hers she passed the same thumb over her lower lip, felt the heat, a slight tenderness from the pressure of his 57

mouth. His hands tightened the tops of the sofa cushions, strong muscles clenched with restraint. She bent to nibble on the hard curve of his biceps, felt the muscles tremble, then go hard under her lips and teeth. With a groan his head dropped back. She took advantage of his exposed throat and sucked on the heated, salty skin covering his pounding pulse as she teased his nipples between her thumbs and forefingers.

His growl, low and rough in his throat, sent electric heat flashing through her.

Closer. She needed to get closer, now, so she hiked up the houndstooth skirt to the tops of her thighs and pressed her wet, aching sex to the rigid length confined in his uniform trousers. She slid up and down the hard bulge once, twice, each motion chafing her silk panties against her swollen clit.

Hunter lifted his head, looked over her breasts, her hiked-up skirt now exposing the lacy tops of her thigh-high stockings. “Fuck,” he muttered and cupped her bottom, sliding her skirt up over her hips. Matching silk and lace covered her mound. He hooked his fingers in her panties and tried to tug them down.

Equally determined, Lacey scooted back and reached for his zipper, but was quickly stymied by the complicated tangle of gun belt, regular belt, button and zipper.

Their hands fumbled together for a moment before he gripped her wrists and lifted her hands.

“Condom,” he said, his voice a low rasp in the still air of her living room.

She left him to his zipper and reached for her purse. Never in her life had she carried condoms with her, but Hunter seemed like a man she needed to be prepared for.

She tore a single packet loose from a strip and ripped it open. He gritted his teeth as she helped him roll the thin latex down to the base of his shaft.

His hands went back to her panties. “Gotta get these off, beautiful,” echoed faintly in her head but the words made no sense. She leaned over to kiss him, rubbing the silk against his erection again. Another groan, then a twist of his fist and her panties dropped away from one hip.

She was melting desire held up by bone-deep lust, and just when she thought things couldn’t get any hotter, he gripped one hip hard, urged her up, then wrapped the other hand around his shaft to lift it away from his abdomen. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and looked down at her black and white checked skirt rucked up around her hips, at his cock jutting from his open navy uniform pants, at her trimmed auburn curls, at the scrap of lace and silk now sagging against her taut thigh. His fist engulfed the lower half of his cock as the tip disappeared into her swollen folds, probing for entrance.

The sting of penetration made her gasp, then gasp again when her wet folds came to rest against the thumb and forefinger encircling his straining shaft. As she slid down he caressed her stretched opening with a finger on either side of his cock, an intimate, possessive touch that rocked her world as she took him all the way inside her.

Her palms flat against his bare, damp chest, she took a measured breath, then another. She rose, the head of his cock dragging against her swollen inner tissues, and 58

slid back down, her body now adjusting eagerly to his. Two more strokes and a light sweat broke out all over her body.

Hunter reached around and unhooked her bra, then pulled it down and off. “Do that again,” he said, focused on the gentle bounce of her breasts when she came to rest against his pelvis.

“You are the hottest fucking thing I have ever seen,” he muttered, then caressed her breasts, squeezing gently before he pinched her nipples with a firm touch that made her eyelids droop. “Stockings, heels and that skirt looked so prim on your sweet little ass outside.”

She looked down at his big hands, so dark against her pale skin, and watched a pink flush move up to her collarbone as she rode him. “Not so prim now, am I?”

“No, ma’am,” he drawled, his clever fingers rolling her nipples with a sure, sexy touch.

“You do that to me.”

The words made his eyes turn jade-dark, sending a surge of gratification through her. She spread her thighs a little wider to get that much closer, her clit now rubbing against his ridged stomach with every increasingly heated downstroke. Her stockings snagged on something on his belt, but she didn’t care, simply didn’t care because he was letting her find her own rhythm and pinching her nipples in time to her movements. Pushing his broad, damp shoulders back into the cushions, she tossed her head back, the pressure growing, each engulfing movement stroking his shaft against nerve endings that tingled, then burned, then burst into flames. The firm grip of his hands sent achingly delicious rivers of molten pleasure streaming through her belly to coalesce in her clit.

Riding him hard now, her hair clung to her cheeks as she dug her fingers into his shoulders, each impact forcing a soft exhalation from her throat. Pressure, unexpected and all-consuming, built behind her clit, spread in a thick ache through her body to her nipples, her fingertips, her swollen lips, sparking like flint against rock each time they brushed his. Wild with need, each long, sweet, grinding thrust brought her closer to the imminent heart-pounding release.

“Hunter?” she gasped. Good, so good and she couldn’t leave him

behind.

“I’m there, beautiful,” he growled, his face etched with agony. His shaft thickened inside her just as the crest slammed into her. Wave after wave of hot, syrupy pleasure swamped her, heightened by Hunter’s final thrusts into her convulsing flesh. His release pulsed inside her as his head dropped back, the tendons standing out in his throat, then softening as the tension slowly ebbed from his body.

Tick-tock-tick-tock. A few moments later he slid his hand into her hair to pull her to him and kiss her with a satisfied thoroughness. Then he looked at his watch. “I’ve got ten minutes.”

Raising herself up on quivering thighs, she disengaged their bodies. Her torn panties clung to one thigh, so she pushed them down.

“Sorry I ruined your underwear,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it.” She’d bought it for Davis, in an effort to entice him into spicier sex, then more sex, then any kind of intimate contact at all. It hadn’t worked, one sign of many that something was seriously wrong with their relationship. If Hunter wanted to rip it off her, she wasn’t going to stop him.

She shimmied her skirt over her hips. Silence reigned as she stepped out of her heels and pulled her blouse back on. Her fingers trembling, she fastened buttons at random, unable to stifle a shudder as the cool silk caressed her thrusting nipples.

“What?” she asked, intrigued by the amusement in his eyes as he sprawled on her sofa in the shambles of his uniform.

“You were pretty sexy in your suit, beautiful, but you’re even sexier well fucked.” He needed to be kissed again, no doubt about it, so she leaned over and sampled his lips. “Go take a quick shower while I make you something to eat. What do you want?” she said.

“I’ll take another lemonade.”

“Lemonade? You must weigh two hundred pounds. You want lemonade for dinner?”

He shot her a look. “Two-twenty, beautiful. It’ll remind me of you when I leave.

Sweet, but just a little tart.”

Her swat at his naked shoulder missed as he bounded upstairs, shirts dangling from one hand.

“I can cook,” she called after his disappearing back.

Minutes later he stood in her kitchen, buttoning his shirt over the vest. His pile of gear lay on the granite-topped island. As she poured fresh lemonade into an insulated travel mug he clipped everything back into place with practiced ease. His close-cropped hair was a little damp, but the only other visible sign of their interlude was a slight dark flush receding from his cheekbones.

“Restored to order,” she said as she pushed the mug across the island to him.

“What were you going to do before I showed up?”

“Make lemonade and sit on the porch to go through the mail.” A grin flashed across his face. “What about now?”

“Shower, then make dinner, sit on the porch and go through the mail.”

“Glad I wasn’t too much of a disruption.”

“You can disrupt me like that any time,” she said and meant it. “I thought you didn’t take meal breaks.”

“I don’t usually. It’s a pain to eat somewhere because people stare. Half the time I finish my food in the car because I get a call.”

“But how did you know you wouldn’t get a call tonight?” she asked,

remembering how he'd silenced his radio.

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Liberating Lacey

"Another officer's covering my sector. Gotta go, beautiful." He kissed her, hot and slow. "See you later," he said as he turned up the volume on his radio and patted each item on his belt in an automatic, reassuring way.

A small smile touched her face as she closed the door behind him and went upstairs to take a shower. The suit and blouse went in the dry cleaner's bag, the ruined panties in the trash and the bra in her mesh lingerie bag. Before turning on the water she stared in the mirror.

Her figure was good, her waist narrow from a careful diet and regular yoga classes, but her hips were a little fuller than she'd like and her breasts were beginning to lose the firm lift of youth. She pressed the pads of her fingers to her lips, still pouting pink from his hard kisses. She was no expert in these matters, but Hunter seemed to find her more than sexy enough.

She turned the taps to send water gushing from the shower head, absently dangling her fingers in the rapidly heating spray. What had possessed him to come over like that? She didn't mind at all, of course, but it seemed out of character for him. If he called, her phone rang late in the day. More often he set up dates via text message or email. His arrival was utterly unexpected.

Spontaneous.

The water ran hot over her hand, but she turned it off, threw on her robe and dashed down the stairs. Her BlackBerry was wedged in the sofa cushions. She grabbed it and scrolled through her recent calls to find his cell number.

"Anderson."

"Did you just surprise me with a spontaneous, unplanned activity?"

A slow laugh over the squawk of the radio in the background. “That’s what I was going for, beautiful, but if you have to ask…” His voice was lazy, pleased.

“No, no, you did,” she said. Her heart flip over in her chest. At Juana’s she’d mentioned how her life had sorely lacked spontaneity and surprises, a couple of sentences in a three-hour conversation about work, marriage, her desire to explore what she’d missed as a young, hard-charging newlywed. At the time he’d said nothing but clearly he’d filed away the remark. He’d remembered and acted on what he’d heard.

“What if you hadn’t seen me coming home early?”

“Some other time.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Trust me, beautiful, the pleasure was all mine.” The warmth in his voice, evident despite the background chatter, sent delight skittering through her.

“I won’t keep you,” she began.

“Lunch Saturday?” he interrupted.

“Yes. Come over. I’ll cook.”

“I’ll pick you up at noon,” he said as if she hadn’t spoken.

She tried again. “I *can* cook…”

“But I’ll take you out. See you Saturday,” he said and disconnected the call.

“We don’t have to eat out all the time,” she said as the call time flashed on the BlackBerry screen. “Really. I’m actually kind of a

homebody. My kitchen isn't just for show. I like to cook, have coffee in front of the fire, or on the deck, so I don't feel rushed to leave a restaurant."

But maybe he didn't. Maybe to a young, determinedly single player, preparing a meal together was somehow more intimate than that moment when he spread her legs and pushed into her body.

Upstairs, the water in the pipes was still warm. She stepped under the spray and lathered green tea body wash in her hands before smoothing her palms over her breasts and between her legs. Soapy bubbles streamed into the drain, along with the residue of their unplanned interlude.

She could wash away the sweat, the slickness between her thighs, the smell of sex.

The physical pleasure would fade, but she couldn't deny the increasing space Hunter occupied in her mind. She thought about him, wondered if he was safe, wondered when he'd call.

The wondering was a mistake, a sign of getting attached, but she felt sure that what was happening between them wasn't just about sex. He took her out first, listened to her talk, spent the night. He didn't have to do any of those things. That meant something.

Be careful, Claire's voice whispered in the back of her mind. *You're in danger.*

Hush, her conscience replied. *Live. That's what you wanted to do.Right?*

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Chapter Six

Hunter sat back on his heels and braced his hands on his thighs as he eyed what was left of the pile of mulch at the end of Lacey's driveway. About a wheelbarrow-full remained, just enough to fill in some thin spots. With the shovel borrowed from her garage, he scraped down to the bricks in the driveway, shoveled the last chips into the wheelbarrow and pushed around to the beds bordering her front porch. The wheelbarrow also came from her unlocked garage. He'd mention that to her the next time he saw her. Aside from nice gardening hand tools the garage held nothing of value. The ex probably got the lawn mower and any other power tools like an edger or a snow blower, but that didn't mean she should leave the door unsecured.

Before he began to empty the wheelbarrow he finished off the last of the water in his Coleman jug. He needed to take a leak soon. He'd cover the thin spots, then head out, leaving behind eight thickly mulched flower beds, another surprise for Lacey.

Showing up at her house unexpectedly a few days ago led to the hottest in-uniform sex he'd ever had and he'd had plenty. Women went for blue, no doubt about it, and by the second or third date girls usually dropped hints about handcuffs. Lacey just dropped them.

He wouldn't have minded watching her ride him like she had, but with her hands secured behind her back. If he was a betting man, he'd lay money that the idea of a little restraint play appealed to her on some level, but the bracelets also made people nervous. A woman as independent as Lacey might not want the loss of control, that level of surrender. Fine by him. This was her deal, her series of firsts.

He shoveled the mulch into the beds and dropped to his knees to distribute the wooden shards carefully among her flowers and bushes, making sure a thick layer spread right to the brick border.

Just as he smoothed the last of the uneven spots Lacey's BMW 5-series pulled into her driveway.

Busted.

She got out of the car and walked around the hood, looking very, very fine in a pink suit and cream heels. The last redhead he dated claimed she couldn't wear pink, but Lacey's hair was less carroty, more auburn, than his previous girlfriend's. The rosy color of the suit set off her pale skin and made the waves of her hair even more eye-catching. Lacey knew style, all right. There was absolutely nothing overtly sexy about her outfit and yet he went hard watching her walk up the sidewalk.

"Damn," he said as he sat back and looked up at her. "I wanted to surprise you."

"I'm surprised," she said. The smile in her voice matched the delighted grin on her face. "I'm very pleasantly surprised. Thank you. You really didn't need to do this." 63

"I know," he said. That was the real shocker here. One surprise should have been enough for both of them. She clearly hadn't expected another.

"I thought you were working with your father today." She bent over the bed. For an astonished moment he thought she was checking his work, but she just snapped off some pink and purple flowers. As she collected a bouquet the front of her suit gapped open, revealing the swell of her breast supported by white lace.

"Granite shipment was delayed until tomorrow," he replied, dragging his eyes back to her face. "I'm back on duty so Dad's going to have to do it himself."

"That's a shame," Lacey said.

"His loss is your gain, beautiful."

“Yes, but you could have had a day off. Relaxed.” He didn’t know how to relax. He’d learned a long time ago that staying in motion kept him out of trouble. “I like to stay busy.”

“My gain, indeed. I brought you some lunch. Just sandwiches from Great Harvest, but it’s the least I could do.”

“Great. Hey, toss me your keys.”

She didn’t ask why, just dropped her keys in his outstretched palm and bent back to the flower bed. He took the porch steps in a single leap and unlocked the door. When he emerged from the bathroom, the mulch scrubbed from his hands and the dirt smear wiped from his forehand, he heard Lacey in the kitchen. The flowers were in a small ceramic vase in the middle of the oak farmhouse kitchen table. A roast beef sandwich, layered with cheddar, lettuce and tomato, sat on a plate on the table. She set an unopened bag of kettle-cooked potato chips next to his place. Her plate held half a hummus sandwich loaded down with spinach, tomato, sprouts and cucumbers.

“Soda?”

“Whatever you’ve got,” he said.

She handed him a Cherry Coke and sat down with a Diet 7-UP for herself.

“My favorites,” he said, looking at the soda and chips. She’d paid attention to what he ordered when they went out for lunch.

“I try to keep my friends’ favorites on hand,” she said.

“Friends?” He couldn’t resist as he offered her the bag of chips.

She declined with a shake of her head. “I hope we’re friends. Spreading mulch for me seems like a friendly thing to do.”

He had friends who were female, cops mostly, but he didn’t fuck them, he didn’t spread mulch for them and he didn’t like where this conversation was going. “Maybe I have ulterior motives,” he said just before he bit into the sandwich.

She chewed, swallowed, then put her sandwich down, all with a careful precision that set off warning bells in his head. “Did you do my yard work in order to sleep with 64

me, Hunter? Surely you know you don’t need to. I must seem like a laughably sure thing.”

He finished his mouthful and slugged back some soda, then gave her a level look.

“What brought that on?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, rubbing her forehead. “That was uncalled for. It’s just…a friend of mine said some things today. I’m a little out of sorts.” He resumed eating, but cautiously, because a sharp-tongued, edgy Lacey was a new thing. “What things?”

“Just some remarks about dating a younger man.” She bit off a tiny section of her sandwich. He hardly knew she took bites, chewed, but at the end of her meal her plate was clean and she was always ready for dessert. When she swallowed, she added, “She covered the cattiness with teasing, but I know she was partially serious. That kind of thing always has some foundation in the truth.”

“And it bothers you.”

“The difference in our ages doesn’t bother me. Someone calling you my pool boy bothers me.”

He let out a snort stifled in part by another hunk of sandwich and resolved to slow down. “Pool boy?”

“Or yard boy, as the case may be. Mrs. Duffy across the street called to tell me a strange man was mulching my petunias.”

“It’s the latest crime wave, people illegally performing yard work.” She rolled her eyes.

“White-haired woman two doors to the north, brick house, rose

bushes out front?" He'd noticed the elderly woman watching him from behind her lace curtains and figured he was under neighborhood watch. He hadn't thought she'd call Lacey at work.

"Yes. She described you, then asked if she should call the police. I told her you *were* the police and a friend. There was this long silence a writer would call 'pregnant', then she asked if Davis knew about you. I nearly bit my tongue off to keep from reminding her that Davis and I were divorced and my friends were none of his concern, but my response of 'no' was probably a bit abrupt. Jenna Mason-Caldwell stopped by with the details for the Metropolitan Club cocktail hour right after this conversation and wanted to know why I was agitated. I made the mistake of telling her about Mrs. Duffy's call.

She added her own pool boy comments." She sighed. "I need to make a pan of brownies and take them down to Mrs. Duffy to apologize."

"Sounds like she was sticking her nose where it didn't belong," he said.

"Nevertheless, there was no reason for me to be rude to her." That attitude probably meant he shouldn't go introduce himself in full uniform. "So what's the problem?"

She thought about this for a moment. "I don't like you being reduced to a stereotype."

Her steadfast determination to defend him touched him. "Don't let it bother you, beautiful. You can't control what other people think."

"It doesn't bother you?"

It bothered the fuck out of him, but not because of the age difference. He maintained a casual approach because she was clearly ruffled. "Nah. You wouldn't believe what I get called on the

job."

She smiled and met his eyes, which had been his goal. "I suppose that's true."

"You commercial mortgage types don't call each other names at meetings?" he asked, really going for the funny now.

"Behind backs, I'm sorry to say," she said in a much more light-hearted tone,

"although I was in one meeting with two of the city's most prominent developers where one gentleman called another a 'lying motherfucker' as he stormed out of the room."

"Amateurs. I don't go for my flashlight until they get to 'cocksucking pig'." At that she let out a very unladylike laugh and had to reach for a napkin to cover her mouth. When she swallowed, she said, "You're not my yard boy." Her eyes were so intent, so serious, he couldn't continue to joke with her about it.

"You don't need to defend me, Lacey. I know who I am." She smiled again, but the distress remained behind the smile. The words *sure thing* rang in his head. "What else?"

"It's nothing."

This protecting him thing had to stop, because he couldn't imagine anything worse than being seen as Lacey's rent boy and they'd already covered that. "I thought we were giving this friends thing a try."

Lacey looked at him, both eyebrows raised, then held up her hands, her slim, ringless fingers curved into mock-claws tipped by manicured nails painted a pale pink, and meowed at him. The action was so out of character and shocking it took him a second to figure it out, and then he couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing, a rare belly laugh.

"Reduced you to a stereotype, too, *cougar*?" She nodded, pulled two oatmeal chocolate chip cookies from the paper bag that held the sandwiches, and bit into one with the enthusiasm of a woman

drowning a bad day in sugar.

“Some friend,” he said as he snagged the other cookie.

“Acquaintance, really. My mother taught me a lady never descends to someone else’s level, but I badly wanted to slap her.”

He tried to imagine Lacey in a hair-pulling, bitch-slapping fight, and failed. He didn’t know what to say, so they ate their cookies in silence. Finally she looked at him, her hair a fiery halo around her face, and shrugged as if to say *what can you do*?

Then he knew. “Still where you want to be, beautiful?” 66

Liberating Lacey

The reminder of their conversation at Juana’s made the tense lines around her mouth soften as she smiled. She nodded again. “Yes.”

“Then fuck ‘em.” His words were hard, matter-of-fact. Fuck Mrs. Duffy and this friend who made Lacey feel shitty.

Now if he could just take his own advice.

“An excellent strategy,” she said, and polished off her cookie. She looked at her watch, a slim gold case on a worn black leather band that had all the hallmarks of an expensive antique. “I need to get back to the office. Can you lock up when you leave?”

“I’m on my way out, too. By the way, you need to lock the door to your garage. You don’t have much worth stealing, but an easy in to the garage might make criminals look for a way into the house.”

She looked surprised. “We’ve never locked the garage.”

“Start.” The word came out too blunt, so he added, “One friend to another.”

“All right.” She picked up the plates and loaded them in the dishwasher while he chucked the soda cans in her recycling tub. “If you come by again, I keep a key under the largest flower pot on the

back deck."

He shook his head, amused. "I know, Lacey. I found it this morning after I let myself into the garage. I didn't use it because, unlike your average criminal, I care that you didn't give me permission to enter your house when you weren't home. Don't your neighbors have keys?"

"Of course, yes. I keep one outside so I don't have to bother them. I assume you're going to make another friendly recommendation?"

He just nodded. They walked out the back door, across the deck and to the largest ceramic pot. Hunter bent and lifted so Lacey could slide the key over the wet, damp wood and pick it up. He caught a second glimpse of white lace cupping the soft flesh of her breast and idly wondered if the rest of her underwear matched the bra. Lacey seemed to like matching sets.

She considered the key for a moment as Hunter set the flowerpot down. For a second he thought she was going to offer it to him. She didn't.

"Thanks again for mulching for me. I really appreciate it."

"Glad to help." He reached for her, but remembered his sweaty, grimy state, her pretty pink suit and let his hand drop. With a smile she stepped forward, put her hands on his chest to keep a couple of inches between them and went on tiptoe to kiss him.

His little redheaded witch didn't give him a peck on the lips. She licked and nibbled while his cock hardened painfully in his jeans. He reached for her again, then clenched his fist and shook his head. He was a grown man, with bits of dirt and mulch clinging to his jeans and t-shirt. He was due for a shower. A little soap, a little imagination…

As if she could read his mind she backed away, a teasing gleam in her eye and said,

"I have to be back at the office in twenty minutes." If they were going to play this game, she'd lose. Every time. Starting now.

“You work five minutes away, tops.” He grabbed her hand to keep her close, then kissed her with about the same effort to keep things sane and civil. He slid his tongue into her mouth and let the pent-up longing dictate the intensity, his heart rate soaring when she softened, opened to him.

She stepped away, ran a tentative knuckle over her lips and shook her head, but the gesture lacked her usual crispness when she meant business.

“Come on, beautiful,” he cajoled, edging toward her, backing her toward the door.

“It won’t take long.”

“That’s not exactly what a woman wants to hear,” she said, but her hand was groping for the doorknob as she said it.

He didn’t bother to answer, just had the door open and his shirt over his head before he realized she was headed up the stairs.

“Where are you going?” he called, his hands fumbling with his belt buckle.

“I don’t keep condoms in the kitchen!”

Well, damn. He grabbed his shirt and took the stairs two at a time. When he rounded the doorframe into her bedroom her jacket lay carefully folded on the cedar chest at the foot of her bed. She stood with her back to him, bent over as she slid her skirt down.

He stopped in his tracks at the look she tossed him over her shoulder, through the layers of her hair. White lacy briefs cut high on her ass went with the bra he’d glimpsed outside and, oh Jesus, more white lace topped the sheer stockings. When he reached for her she held up an imperious hand, then unfastened the front catch of the bra, let it drop behind her and slid her thong down, leaving

her in nothing but the stockings and heels.

He felt like he'd taken a fist to the temple. He stared at the red curls covering her mound, the sweet pink tips of her breasts, the way her hair fell in her eyes. Who was winning this game?

"Nice stockings," he growled as he caught her around the waist, spun her around and hoisted her up on the bed. With a gasping laugh she sprawled forward, landing on her hands and knees. Before she could right herself he nudged her legs apart and knelt between them, popped the buttons on his jeans to release his shaft, then reached over her shoulder to grab a condom from the nightstand and smooth it on.

Restive and eager, she shifted as if to turn and face him. "No you don't," he said and put one hand between her shoulder blades to push her face down onto her folded arms, leaving her ass tipped in the air. She shuddered and went still for him. He widened his stance and pushed against her folds. Ripples of arousal raced under her skin but with no foreplay at all she was barely wet.

He leaned forward to lay the length of his torso from abs to shoulders along the pale, cool skin of her back. An arm planted on either side of her, he nuzzled into her silky hair. "Like playing games, do you?" he whispered in her ear, soft and warm to counterbalance the threat in the words, because while he had a pretty good idea how she'd respond to this, he wouldn't push.

She didn't answer with words, but her breath hitched in that way that made him fucking insane and he wasn't even inside her. The silk of her stockings rasped against his jeans as she pressed against his inner thighs, trying to widen her stance. At the same time she tilted her hips up and back. With the motion the tip of his cock slid into her now-moist channel.

Fuck yeah. She might not say it out loud, but she liked the games.

Heart pounding against his sternum, he straightened, put his hands on her hips and rocked against her, listening to her soft, muffled whimpers escalate as he demanded entrance to her tight heat. When he was buried to the hilt inside her he pulled out and drove back in, the motion now slick, accepting. Hit bottom, back out again and Lacey's fingers curled into the comforter. With the third stroke she braced her hands against the mattress and pushed herself upright.

He wrapped his arms around her torso, one arm clamped around her hips to hold her ass tight to his stomach, the other around her ribs, just under her breasts. Her nails bit into the skin of his wrists and she tightened up. He bent her forward just a little and with his next thrust knew he'd found that sweet spot inside her when she let out a breathy sob. Then he worked it with every urgent stroke.

Her hands fluttered up, the fingers spread as if searching for something to hold onto, then one clamped down on the nape of his neck while the other dropped to fist in the loose denim of his jeans and held on for dear life. The tug of her hand against his nape made his head drop to her shoulder. Eyes glazed, he looked past pale skin and tendrils of fiery hair at his dark arms restraining her body and almost lost it then and there.

He cupped one breast and pinched the nipple, then found her clit, swollen and wet at the top of her open sex. She jumped and wriggled in his relentless grip, her hand tightening on his neck as he maintained the pace, deep and hard.

"Oh God, oh God, don't stop, please don't stop!" Fuck, he knew it was wrong but when she begged like that he felt like a caveman.

Primitive. Possessive. He didn't divert any attention to forming words, just kept the same firm touch on her clit and set his teeth against her shoulder. She moaned that lusty, throaty sound that made his balls tighten. Her stomach muscles leaped against his forearm, then her head dropped back on his shoulder and she arched hard, drawn taut like a bow as she came. He slowed and thrust through the contractions, going over the edge just as she finished. He tightened his grip on her trembling body and poured himself into her.

He leaned forward again, this time to lay her face down against the bed, then pressed a kiss between her shoulder blades as he pulled out. “Six minutes,” he said, checking the clock on the way to the bathroom. “Not something I’d usually brag about but I figured you’d want to take a shower.”

Ass still tipped in the air, her face in her forearms, she spoke. “I’ve never done that before.”

There was a first in this? Condom removal handled, he buttoned his jeans, buckled his belt and pulled on his shirt. “Done what?” he asked, leaning nonchalantly against the wall in an attempt to cover his shaky knees. They fucked from behind all the time, starting with the first night on the stairs.

“A quickie over lunch.” She pushed back off the bed and kicked off her heels. “I’m going to go back to work in ten minutes after a quickie.” He put his hands on his hips and watched her shimmy a stocking down her leg.

“You never met your ex for a quickie,” he said, but wasn’t a question. “Didn’t he work two blocks down from you?”

“He still does,” she said and scampered past him to fling open the glass door and turn on the water.

“And you never met for sex.”

“Never.” She stepped into the shower. “Oh my, that’s cold!” It was on the tip of his tongue to ask how a man lived and worked five minutes from his smoking hot red-headed wife and never found a free hour in his day to take her to bed, but he didn’t say anything. Two minutes later she was out, dripping and pink from the cold water. He handed her a towel and watched her redress, yanking silk and lace over damp skin, zipping her skirt, shrugging into her jacket.

She buttoned the jacket on her way down the stairs. “Is my hair…?”

“Looks good,” he said as he opened the front door for her.

She closed and locked the door while he jogged down the steps. A quick glance at the red brick house two doors to the north told him Mrs. Duffy was peering through her front windows at him.

He offered his hand to Lacey. Accepting it automatically, her eyes widened with an unspoken question, then danced with humor when he glanced toward the busybody’s house.

“Thank you for mulching the beds for me.”

“Thanks for the sandwich. And another first,” he said with a wink.

She ducked her head and gave him a smile that was somehow embarrassed, amused and incredibly sexy. “You must be getting tired of those.”

“Not yet, beautiful.” *Not ever.*

She clicked open the locks on her BMW. “See you soon?”

“I’ll call you,” he equivocated. Hot sex, a casual meal, the kind of shitty-day-comfort that, until this point, he’d gotten and given only with fellow officers, or his father. This was spiraling. He needed to get some control back.

“Okay,” she said, not seeming to mind at all. “Have a good afternoon.” He watched her back out of the driveway and zip down the street, knowing his efforts to establish some distance were fruitless. He’d call tonight. Probably sooner.

You’re fucked, Anderson. And not in a good way.

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Chapter Seven

“Gosh darn it!” Lacey’s ringing BlackBerry slid off the passenger seat and thudded onto the floorboards, well out of easy reach. Retrieving it at forty miles per hour wasn’t an option, not with rush hour traffic flowing around her. She’d grab it at the next stoplight and hope the caller left a message. Start to finish, it had been one of those days, the kind where she ran two stockings while getting dressed, the gas tank was on E

when she had meetings all over town and not a minute to spare, and the dreaded upcoming Entrepreneurs’ Association cocktail hour at the Metropolitan Club loomed in her mind.

As she crested the hill and began the coast toward the stoplights, cruising in the inside lane, a motorcycle parked at the end of the median separating four lanes of traffic caught her attention. She automatically braked and looked for another car, or an injured driver. After a few moments she registered that the motorcycle parked perpendicular to the median was a big black and white Harley and the individual leaning against it, his long, boot-clad legs casually crossed at the ankle, was a police officer, holding what was likely a radar gun.

Traffic was too heavy to speed so with a clear conscience she came to a complete stop right next to the officer’s Harley, unbuckled her seatbelt and scrabbled for the BlackBerry. She made use of the time at the traffic light to scroll through the messages.

Her next appointment was also running late, thank God. Delete. An email from Claire with new photos of Lanie. She’d look at those at the office. Another reminder about the event at the Metropolitan Club, already on her calendar. Delete. An offer on the Shadow Run development, 10% below market and absolutely unacceptable.

“Buckle up, beautiful.”

Coming through her windows the words were a little muffled but

the commanding tone conveyed the message. She jumped and reached for the seat belt she'd forgotten to put back on, then the voice registered. Hunter.

Obediently she clicked the belt into the latch, then depressed the button to roll down her window. Dressed in a different uniform, tan jodphurs tucked into knee-high black boots, a tan shirt with short sleeves and a black Harley helmet with POLICE on the back, he was barely recognizable. His mirrored Rēvo shades covered his eyes. At least now she recognized the gear on his belt. A tremor rolled through her at the memories that evoked.

He was clearly working, so she kept quiet and watched him aim the radar gun toward the oncoming traffic behind her. He depressed the radio at his shoulder with his thumb and forefinger and spoke into it. Curious, she glanced in her rear view mirror 71

and saw an identical police Harley pull out of the driveway to the power plant and switch on its lights behind a red Mustang that practically levitated over the hill.

"Fifty-five in a forty," he said, lowering the gun but keeping his eyes trained on the motorcycle and car behind her. The setting sun gleamed in a nimbus behind his wide shoulders and chest. "What brings you to this side of town?"

"I had a meeting with two clients and a developer. You?" His normal sector was near her neighborhood.

"Six guys in the Western have food poisoning from a cookout at the softball game last night. I'm pulling a double."

She raised her eyebrows. They'd gone out for lunch or dinner twice since the quickie over lunch. While he'd said he'd agreed to a double on Monday, she hadn't heard from him all week and this shift was news to her. "Second this week?"

"Third. The Southern had four officers in court yesterday." Reaching under his shades with his thumb and forefinger, he

rubbed his eyes.

Three sixteen-hour shifts in four days sounded brutal. “When’s your next day off?”

“I’m off at four today.”

“Come to dinner,” she said on impulse. They had no plans for a future date. When he left in the morning after a night together, he’d kiss her and say, “I’ll call you.” Several times she rearranged her schedule to be able to see him. Claire’s lips had whitened when she heard that little tidbit of information and Lacey knew her friend was biting her tongue to keep from warning her about the perils of falling for a player.

As the weeks passed, though, she’d learned enough about the life of a cop to know making commitments to dates or activities wasn’t easy. He could be called in on a moment’s notice and often covered shifts for fellow officers.

But she also recognized an effort to maintain some distance, which made what she wanted to ask of him that much harder to voice.

He turned to face her. She couldn’t see his eyes through the sunglasses, but the firm line of his mouth and the grooves in his cheeks bespoke his exhaustion. “I’ll take you out, Lace.”

She tipped her sunglasses down her nose to look over the frames at him. “Hunter, I’m starting to think you’re afraid of my cooking. Come over for dinner. It’s just steaks, baked potatoes and salad, but I’ll let you man the grill if you’re afraid I’ll poison you.” He shook his head, his attention torn between her and the traffic stop ahead of him.

Almost cursing his stubbornness, she glared at him. A little manly decisiveness was fine, but enough was enough. “I’m too tired to go out. Come over or spend your evening alone, Officer Anderson.”

For a moment she thought her ultimatum would backfire, then the slightest of smiles touched his mouth. “Just trying to do right by you, Ms. Meyers,” he said as he hefted the radar gun again.

"I *can* cook," she said, feigning irritation. "Toss a salad, throw two potatoes in the oven, put steaks on the grill." Assuming the grill still worked. "It's not haute cuisine, of course, but…"

"I'll be there." He spoke into the radio at his shoulder again. She opened her mouth to reply but he cut in. "The light's green, beautiful. See you around six." Probably the reason the people behind her hadn't honked was because she was in conversation with a police officer. "Oh!" she said and mashed the gas pedal to the floor.

The BMW leaped forward with a squeal of tires. She shot through the light before she thought to let up on the gas and reduce her speed to a more sedate pace.

Suddenly a marginal day didn't look so bad. She left work on time, shooing Kelly the Indispensable out in front of her, and put the potatoes in the oven before changing into jeans and a thin green cotton tunic with heavy embroidery around the V-neck. The grill heated, the salad fixed and a baguette buttered and ready to warm in the oven, she took a glass of wine and a novel to the chaise.

Shortly after six Hunter zoomed up the driveway on his motorcycle and came to a stop by her garage. He swung his leg over the bike, pulled off the helmet and climbed the stairs one at a time to her deck. Without a word he dropped the helmet on a chair next to the teak dining table. His kiss was quick and perfunctory, then he went into the kitchen.

"Fuck, I'm tired," he said when he returned, a soda in one hand and a glass of water in the other.

Tight lines were etched into the skin around his mouth and his broad shoulders slumped under a gray t-shirt. "You look it," she said.

"I worked fifty-six hours in four days and I didn't hydrate enough

today. I've got a bitch of a headache." He turned his back, braced his forearms on the deck railing and looked out into the yard.

Perhaps tonight wasn't a good night for her to take their relationship outside the established boundaries. Mildly disappointed, she went back to her book. For several minutes the only sounds were the crickets and the wind in the leaves, but ever so slowly the tightness eased from his spine. He finished the Cherry Coke and turned to face her.

"Let's try that again," he said. "Hi. You're a sight for sore eyes."

"It's nice to see you too," she said, closing the book and smiling up at him. "Do you want some aspirin?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

She returned with two aspirin and the platter of steaks, leaving him to the grilling while she put the bread in the oven and brought the salad and potatoes outside.

"How do you like your steak?"

"Medium's fine," she said, peeking at the grill as she ducked under his arm to light the citronella candles. "It's working okay? I didn't use it all last year." 73

The sizzling meat sent a mouth-watering aroma into the air. Hunter flipped both steaks, then moved one to the warming rack. "Looks good to me," he said. "Another minute on yours."

"I'll get the bread," she said and went on tiptoe to kiss the corner of his mouth. By the time he sat down the lines in his forehead had eased. She passed him several slices of warm bread, crispy on the outside, soft and buttery on the inside, accepted her steak and asked him quietly about his day. His answers were terse, so she let him be.

"Sorry," he said halfway through the meal. "I'm pretty bad

company tonight."

"You're fine," she said.

The last of his steak eaten, he braced one booted foot on the ring around the table's pedestal and sat back with something as close to a contented sigh as she'd heard from him. "That was nice." He looked around the backyard. Lacey, treating herself to a third slice of bread, watched his eyes tick off the details. Soft jazz played on portable speakers connected to her iPod and the chrysanthemums in pots all over the deck were beginning to bloom. The breeze and the candles managed to keep the worst of the mosquitoes away. "It's all really nice. Relaxing."

"How's your headache?"

"Pretty well gone."

"Coffee?"

"None for me," he said.

She stood to clear the plates and he shoved his chair back, clearly intending to help.

"Sit down," she said. "This will take two minutes to load in the dishwasher and I'm making coffee for myself anyway."

Half out of his chair, he stopped and looked at her, something wary and tentative in his eyes, then eased back into the seat. She stacked the dinner plates on top of the platter that held the raw steaks and carried everything back into the kitchen. By the time the coffee finished brewing she'd tidied the kitchen and loaded the dishwasher.

She pushed through the door carrying a big cup of decaf.

"See? I can cook," she said before taking a tiny sip of coffee.

"I doubt there's much you can't do if you set your mind to it, beautiful," he replied.

His eyes were closed, legs sprawled in front of him, head resting on the back of the chair. “What’s on your mind?”

“What makes you think I’ve got something on my mind?”

“You’re looking at me like you want to ask me something,” he said to the canopy of leaves arching over her deck. “I’m tired, not pissed at you. What’s up?” Naked in her bed…or on her sofa…or in the shower…having Hunter’s highly trained powers of observation focused on her made for an attentive, deliciously ruthless lover, but Lacey wished the fog of male obtuseness would descend on him occasionally.

Once he honed in on an objective, there was no deterring him.

Liberating Lacey

“I have an event at the Metropolitan Club Friday night. It starts at seven. Will you go with me?”

The muscles under the skin and hair of his forearms tightened just a little, but he didn’t lift his head from the back of the chair. “What’s the event?”

“The local Entrepreneurs’ Association has a quarterly cocktail party. I missed the last two, so I need to go. I’d love some company. Your company, to be specific.” Her heart thumped against her ribcage as she bent her head and studied the contrast between the milky coffee and the dark blue mug.

Without lifting his head he spoke. “Yeah, I’ll go. I don’t have to rent a tux, right?”

“No, professional attire. Suit and tie. Women get a little more dressed up, of course.”

“Sounds fancy.”

“Just another variation on the uniform,” she said.

He smiled, eyes still closed, the tension gone from his body. As twilight took over the backyard she finished her coffee. A raccoon's bright, unblinking eyes stared at her from under her neighbor's woodpile and a family of squirrels began their nightly assault on the squirrel-proof bird feeder hanging from the nearest oak tree. Hunter remained quiet in both voice and body, a stillness that spoke of true exhaustion.

"What would you have done if you were alone tonight?" she asked idly.

"Fast food, watched a ball game. The Cubs are playing," he said, eyes still closed.

"I've got some work to do if you want to watch the game." At that his head snapped up. "You sure?"

She hid her smile behind the coffee cup. "I'm sure." He checked to make sure the grill was turned off and grabbed his helmet while she blew out the candles. Once inside, she found her briefcase and pulled out the files she needed to review while Hunter toed off his boots, sprawled at one end of the sofa and put his feet up on the coffee table. He clicked on the flatscreen TV and surfed at a blurring speed through the channels until he found the Chicago station.

"How do men instinctively understand remotes in all makes and models?"

"Remember health class, when we were split up into boys and girls? Day one was safe sex. Day two was remotes."

She snickered, stretching out on her back on the sofa, feet up on the armrest to prop her reading material on her knees, her head pillowed on his thigh.

"You can concentrate with this on?" he asked as he laid one arm along the back of the sofa, the other loosely holding the remote.

"No problem," she said then immersed herself in the proposals.

Every so often his hand smoothed her hair back from her face. The

grandfather clock struck ten, but Lacey only vaguely remembered the chimes at eight or nine o'clock. Hunter's arm had fallen to rest alongside her body, the long fingers twitching 75

gently against her skin through the thin cotton of her tunic. A quick glance at the TV

showed the game wasn't over. A longer look at Hunter's face showed he was out cold, head cocked at an odd angle, his breath whistling faintly through his open mouth.

Her decision to invite him to the cocktail party at the Met hadn't been a spontaneous one. She'd carefully weighed the relationship implications before asking, ultimately deciding that if she'd crossed the line, Hunter was smart enough to manufacture a shift or an obligation if he didn't want to go. More likely, he'd just turn her down. And while for a moment he'd seemed to be uncomfortable with the idea, she hadn't detected a grudging note in his response.

It's just a party. A work event, really. Male colleagues bring girlfriends in the spring who aren't around in the fall, or even the summer. You're not taking him to a wedding, or a family dinner. It doesn't have to mean anything.

But to her, it did.

Lacey collected and organized the papers strewn around her body, laid them on the coffee table, then pushed herself upright. Normally so alert, Hunter didn't even move.

Carefully sliding the remote from under his slack hand didn't trigger a response, either, nor did turning off the TV. She stood and stretched, watching him sleep. Absent the energy normally vibrating under his skin, he looked like a younger, uncharacteristically vulnerable version of himself. Bruised shadows darkened the skin under his eyes. To avoid waking him she left him as he was, just covered him with the woven Indian throw draped over the back of the sofa and climbed the stairs to the bedroom.

* * * * *

The first thing Hunter registered was the warm smoothness of leather under his face and the faintly acrid scent of tanning and dye in his nostrils. His brain coughed and whirred reluctantly, like a car starting after being parked outside in below-zero temps.

Not his bed. Definitely not Lacey's bed, the only other place he'd been sleeping recently.

Then he smelled coffee, the seductive aroma dark, rich and right in front of his nose.

Not sure if he was dreaming, he opened his eyes and saw a pair of delicate knees, sheathed in flesh-colored silk stockings and primly pressed together under a black skirt.

A coffee cup bearing the logo of one of the local banks rested on the skirt between two pale hands, the nails tipped in pink polish. A whirl of steam rose from the mug, dissipating in front of a pair of gorgeous, lush breasts maddeningly both hidden behind and displayed by a tight green turtleneck.

He knew those knees, those breasts. Turning his head in search of full lips, waves of red hair and dancing brown eyes sent a bolt of pain through his neck, into his shoulder.

He clapped his hand to his nape.

"Shit!"

"Good morning to you, too."

With a groan he turned from his stomach to his back, the blanket from the back of Lacey's couch tangled around his legs. The sofa, the game, dinner with Lacey rushed back in a jumble of words and images.

Did he really agree to go to an event at the members-only Metropolitan Club tonight with her?

“Did the Cubs win?” Not the question on his mind, but probably one not likely to send dismay flashing through those sweet brown eyes.

“No idea. The game was in overtime when I went to bed at ten, tied at two runs each.”

“Extra innings.”

“That’s what I said.”

Damn, she was cheerful this morning. She offered him the coffee cup. He swung his legs over the edge of the couch and sat up. An experimental roll of his head and shrug of his shoulders reassured him he’d live to fight another day, so he took the mug from her hand. “Not decaf, right?”

“Full strength,” she replied.

He sipped. The liquid seared his tongue, throat and stomach. Within seconds a jolt of caffeine shot to his fingertips, and more importantly, his brain. “And then some,” he said.

“I have to go. I’m due at the office in ten minutes. There are scones from Great Harvest in the kitchen. Eat some so I won’t eat them all.” She gave him a quick kiss but stood and hurried out of reach before he could turn the brief caress of her lips into something more.

More coffee. He needed more coffee so he gulped half the mug and stared blankly straight ahead while she bustled around behind him, muttering about her keys.

Sounded like she was putting on her jacket and gathering her kit. BlackBerry, briefcase, purse.

The Metropolitan Club. He’d said yes to prove something, not to her but to himself.

He could walk in into that private club and be her date for an hour or two. He would not look like an intruder. He wouldn't make her look like she was slumming.

Lost in thought he forgot about his neck and looked up when she stopped in front of him. "Ouch! Dammit!"

"Hot shower," she said, then held her fist out, palm down. Assuming she didn't mean to give him a fist bump, he put his hand out, palm up and open. She dropped a single key, the one from under the flowerpot, into his hand. "Lock up when you leave." First an event and now a key? "Lacey, I…" he began as he got to his feet, but she was already moving, her heels clicking against the mahogany flooring.

"Leave it in the mailbox," she said as she turned the deadbolt and opened the front door.

"I'm not leaving it in the mailbox." Not safe, no way. He'd as soon put it back under the damn flowerpot.

"Then keep it and give it to me tonight. Or don't give it back," she said. She blew him a kiss and closed the door behind her. Already on the BlackBerry as she backed out of the driveway, she bumped up over the curb and missed her neighbor's mailbox by mere inches.

"Jesus Christ, beautiful. Who taught you how to drive?" He looked at the key, then at the cup of coffee, then at Lacey's living room. The throw had fallen to the floor when he got up, so he folded it and laid it over the back of the sofa. The fireplace now held tulips. White tulips. Dozens of them. In September.

At a total loss he went into the kitchen, set the key and coffee on the counter and got a scone from the bag. Staring blankly out the window over the kitchen sink at the manicured landscaping that was Lacey's yard, he ate the scone, leaning over the sink to contain the crumbs.

What the hell was happening here? He rarely spent the night with women, but he'd slept at Lacey's half a dozen times. More. He couldn't remember the last time he spent the night with a woman without fucking her. Last night they'd had dinner, hung out on the couch together and he'd slept there. Despite the ache in his neck he was grateful for that. If she'd woken him up to take him upstairs, he would have been up all night. His body clock was totally wrecked at the moment.

But he didn't feel half as tired as he did the day before, or half as mentally exhausted. He felt strange, alone in Lacey's big, solid, silent house. Not uncomfortable.

Just…alone.

So leave.

That seemed like the best, obvious option. He finished his coffee, dumped the rest down the disposal and took a scone for the road. Locking the door without crushing the scone tucked under his arm wasn't easy, but he managed, then shoved the key into his front pocket. He'd give it back on Friday.

Across the street and two doors down, white curtains were pulled back from the front picture window. Mrs. Duffy probably had the phone in her hand, ready to call either Lacey or the gossip network about him. Every established neighborhood had an old bat like that, great for crime prevention and hell for privacy. He stopped on the porch and stared directly at her, faintly discerning white hair and a red sweater half-hidden behind the curtain. After a few moments the curtains twitched closed. He strode down the sidewalk and around the corner of the house to his bike.

Was it his jeans and t-shirt, he wondered as he turned the key and revved the bike's engine. The boots? If he'd worn khakis and a shirt with a collar, driven a luxury sedan not a Dodge Charger or worse, the speed bike, would she have ignored him? Was she on the phone right now, telling all the neighbors about Lacey's indiscreet lover, leaving by the front door at nine in the morning?

Fuck 'em, he thought as he pushed back out of the driveway, remembering his advice to Lacey, but the words rang hollow in his head. He knew all about the power of women like Mrs. Duffy, keepers of the social order. Lacey did, too. She was the one who brought up Mrs. Duffy and the cougar comments.

The alone feeling didn't lessen as he rocketed down the residential street toward Hanover and his own neighborhood. The uncomfortable feeling was back, too.

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Chapter Eight

Lacey no longer expected the same Hunter every time every time she opened her front door, because any one of four or five outward personas might keep a cop's watchful eye on the street while waiting on her porch. The uniformed patrol officer…the paint-and-dust-spattered construction worker…the t-shirt and baggy cargo shorts-wearing athlete…the biker…the business casual date for dinner or the movies or a walk in the park…all would be armed, either openly or concealed, and all would set her pulse pounding by looking at her like *lunch!* for a brief second before the civilized mask dropped into place.

Tonight she opened the door to a suit. She dropped one shoulder and pursed her lips, treating herself to a long, slow look, starting with his ruthlessly shaved jaw. A charcoal gray Italian wool suit emphasized the broad expanse of his shoulders and his narrow hips, the pants legs breaking over brilliantly polished black wing tips. The dark blue tie that just grazed his belt buckle was knotted in a full Windsor, a very nice touch.

"Wow."

"Back at you, beautiful." His gaze flickered over the exposed skin of her collarbone and the swell of her breasts. She wore a forest green raw silk strapless cocktail dress, the full skirt ending just above her knees, and had carefully tucked her hair into a simple knot at the nape of her neck. Strappy black heeled sandals, her grandmother's gold hoops and a two-inch-wide thickly braided gold bracelet were her only accessories.

Hunter stepped forward to push the door open but she held her ground and lifted a hand. "No. Don't even think about it. Every night you come in we have sex before we go out."

The beginnings of a smile quirked up one corner of his mouth. "If you say so, but it sounds like you need to relax."

She reached behind the door for her small beaded clutch and stepped onto the porch to lock up behind her. “I’ll relax when this is over. If you want I’ll relax in the back seat of your car. But I need to meet a very important potential client and if you turn me into a satiated, soft pussycat, I won’t be on my game.” At her entirely serious words he stepped back, hands in the air as if surrendering, then put one hand at the small of her back to escort her down the slate path to his Charger. “I thought this was a casual social thing.”

“It was, until I heard that a developer from Chicago is in town, looking for investment properties to diversify his holdings. He’ll need a local resource for permanent financing. I intend to be that person.” 80

She slid into the passenger seat and fussed with her skirt as he closed her door, then she buckled her seatbelt while he walked around the hood and got in. He reversed out of the driveway and headed down Hanover toward the financial district.

Hunter’s capable driving and ease with silence left Lacey to her own thoughts, something she appreciated with a big opportunity in front of her. She closed her eyes and reached for mental focus. She’d compiled a list of properties likely to interest a buyer with Shane Baldwin’s capital and holdings and had her pitch down pat. A few phone calls to friends of friends and she knew he had gone to school at Cornell and B-school at Wharton and worked in Manhattan before returning to Chicago. Personal details, not tenths of percentage points, were her bread and butter. Anyone could arrange financing. Relationships still drove ninety percent of repeat business.

“Are there two baseball teams in Chicago?” she asked.

“Yeah. Cubs and White Sox. Why?”

“Because Shane Baldwin…oh, turn here! The corner’s kind of tight.” The Metropolitan Club in all its red-bricked, white-columned glory sat well back from the street, half-hidden behind a tall, manicured

privacy hedge. Mature trees loomed over the property and lined the semi-circular drive. They pulled to a halt in front of the majestic white double doors, where a red-coated valet trotted around the hood to Hunter's side of the car and opened the door for him. Another attendant already had Lacey's door open and a hand out to help her out of the car.

Hunter worked the car key off his ring and handed it to the kid.

"Sweet car. Can't beat American muscle," the kid said as he slipped inside and zipped the Charger out of the drive, to the parking lot across the street.

Hunter stared after him as he slipped the valet tag in his pocket. "He must be about sixteen. I bet the parking lot's full of luxury cars."

"I think it's a sweet car," Lacey said with an arch smile. Adrenaline hummed in her veins. Hunter at her side, Shane Baldwin in her sights and the prospect of a deal on the table. She hadn't felt this alive in a work situation in months.

"Tell me you don't turn over your key ring when you use a valet," he said as they walked up the wide brick stairs.

"Hello, Neil." Lacey nodded a greeting to the white-gloved attendant checking invitations at the door. "I do, but since this friend of mine has an issue with keys, I'll start using my valet key. The BMW came with one. It's at home in the junk drawer." Hunter said something under his breath, his hand hovering at her waist as they made their way through the foyer, into the crowded library, where waiters circulated carrying trays laden with plates of hors d'oeuvres and glasses of champagne. The crowd, already considerable, sat in dark leather wingback chairs and low sofas, or were clustered around tall wood tables. Glass cases lining either side of two massive fireplaces held leather-bound books. Two small open bars were set up under the windows between doors that opened to a deck overlooking the private grounds.

“I thought this was a members only club,” Hunter said. He kept close, part protective, part clearing a path for her. The heat radiating from the hand at the small of her back sent a frisson of excitement through her as she strolled to the bar.

“It is, but anyone with an invitation can attend the event.”

“You didn’t show an invitation.”

“It’s at home in my junk drawer with my valet key. I’m a member,” she said.

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised.

A hint of discomfort at the trappings of wealth and privilege slithered up her spine.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m a member because they managed to keep women out of the club until 1996 and because the power brokers in this town do deals here.

Chardonnay, please,” she said to the bartender, who looked inquiringly at Hunter.

“Water,” he said.

When they both had their glasses, she clinked hers to his. “Think of this as a tactical operation. Meet, mingle, socialize, get introduced to Shane Baldwin, leave.”

“To the motivational properties of back seats,” he replied, then sipped. “Who’s our target?”

Stifling a surge of pleasure at *our target*, she glanced toward the windows overlooking the fountain and hedges “Tallest man in the group in the middle of the windows, blond hair, wearing a red power tie.”

He adjusted the set of his shoulders, the same unconscious motion she’d seen him make to resettle his bullet-resistant vest. “Let’s do

this.” For the next forty-five minutes she worked the room, Hunter a mostly silent, looming presence at her side, feeling not unlike a bodyguard. He answered direct questions but contributed little to the conversations as she guided them from one group to another, renewing acquaintances, catching up on industry gossip. When he went to get her a second glass of wine Lacey immersed herself in a conversation with Phil Hodges, the eighty-year-old president of the city’s oldest local bank.

She felt Hunter’s return before he said a word, heat once again radiating against her naked shoulder blades as he handed her a fresh glass and whispered in her ear.

“Baldwin’s alone right now. Look to your right.” She glanced over and saw him once again by the windows, either lost in thought or fascinated by the lawn. Perfect.

“Philip,” she said to the bank president, “I have yet to meet Shane Baldwin.”

“I mentioned you earlier, so please allow me, Laetitia.” He extended his arm to Lacey. “You don’t mind?” he said to Hunter, giving Lacey’s arm a fond pat. “I’m old and she’s very beautiful.”

An amused smile flickered across Hunter’s face as he shook his head. Phil made his slow, meticulous way across the parquet flooring, then introduced her and her “good friend” to Shane. Suddenly able to walk perfectly well on his own he excused himself and disappeared into the crowd.

After a firm, warm handshake for both her and Hunter, Shane directed his attention back to her. “Lacey, Phil tells me you’re the mortgage broker I should be working with in town.”

A nice start, to the point, a professionally courteous smile. “That’s very kind of him, but he is a bit prejudiced. I got my start in his commercial lending division,” she said with the obligatory self-

deprecating laugh. They ran through the basic set of business-related questions and answers before things turned personal. Shane turned to Hunter and said, “Somehow I don’t think you’re in real estate.”

“I’m with the police department.”

Shane smiled. “I recognized the look. My dad was a firefighter for thirty years and my uncle’s with CPD. You’ll never run out of work.”

“Can’t beat the job security,” Hunter replied. “I hear you’re a White Sox fan.”

“Yeah and if you bring up the Cubs, we’re done here.” Both men laughed, then chatted briefly about the White Sox/Cubs rivalry. The Cubs still had a chance to make the playoffs in a few weeks, but to Shane’s dismay the White Sox were out of the running. A detailed discussion about pitching lineups ensued, Hunter’s face actually somewhat animated. For the first time all night, Lacey breathed a sigh of relief, perfectly content to smile and listen. When the conversation ran its course she’d ditch her wine with the nearest waiter, get out of her spike heels and under Hunter.

A soft, heavy body jostled her elbow, nearly spilling her wine on her dress. She exclaimed and held the glass away from her body, managing to keep the liquid contained. Both Hunter and Shane looked up, Hunter’s eyes narrowing for a brief second.

Vince Jameson, a good-old-boy wealth manager in his forties wobbled at her elbow.

Despite the open windows the room was a bit warm and red flags stained his cheekbones. Recovering her poise, Lacey handled the introductions, expecting him to engage Shane in conversation.

Instead he turned to Hunter and said, “I know you.”

“I don’t think so.”

While he’d been reserved during introductions throughout the evening, he’d never so bluntly discouraged a conversational

attempt. Lacey felt her own eyes widen. To cover her shock she lifted her wine glass to her lips.

“Nah. I know you. Did you go to Northwestern? Kappa Phi?” *Definitely too much to drink*, Lacey thought. Hunter’s youth wasn’t as obvious next to Shane’s, who’d clearly availed himself of a facial to go with his discreetly buffed nails, but next to the heavy-jowled, florid Vince, Hunter looked lean, tanned and young.

There was no way they’d been at college together.

“The U,” Hunter said. His words gave the shorthand for the local public university and his tone gave the shorthand for “back off”.

Vince persisted. “You with Western States?”

Hunter shrugged again, the automatic resettling gesture, then shook his head. His eyes flashed to Lacey’s. The animation on his face while he talked baseball had been replaced by the unsmiling cop stare that initially obfuscated his identity when she saw him running the speed trap. A sharp edge of uncomfortable irritation simmered under the surface and warning sirens went off in her brain. She drew breath and opened her mouth to extract them from the conversation but Vince brought up one finger and pointed it at Hunter.

“I know you from somewhere…” Then his expression went from drunken bonhomie to a narrow-eyed distaste, his fingers tightening on a glass brimming the club’s best aged whiskey.

Hunter gave a sharp nod to Shane. “Nice to meet you,” he said and brushed past him. He skirted the edges of the crowd and disappeared through the door to the foyer.

“Did you bring him?” Vince asked her.

It was all Lacey could do to avoid wincing at the overpowering

stench of alcohol on his breath. “Why, yes,” she said.

“He’s a street cop on a power trip. Six, maybe eight months ago he pulled me over on some bullshit pretense. Parked in a no-parking zone after the bars closed, or something. Instead a warning he arrests me. I had to call my wife at two in the morning to get out of jail. Probably behind on his quota. The charges were dropped.” A fine sweat had broken out at Vince’s hairline. He took a big gulp from the glass, his fingers trembling, and no wonder. The story made no sense at all. He was drunk, lying and slandering her lover, but leaping in with claws and fangs bared in front of a guest in her city and at her club simply wasn’t appropriate.

Shane shrugged, clearly finding Vince’s credibility somewhat dubious. “Seemed like a solid guy to me. Lacey, call me about that property tour. I’ll be back in town in a couple of weeks.”

“Of course. I’ll do that. It was a pleasure to meet you,” she said. She turned her back on Vince and worked her way through the throng, back to the front door, searching for Hunter and a waiter to take the blasted glass of wine.

Hunter wasn’t in the foyer. She left the wine on a marble-topped table and hurried through the front door.

“Did you see my date?” she asked the harried valet as he struggled to sort out a mess involving a Lexus, a BMW and a midlife crisis Camero, three impatient men and three sets of keys.

“Yeah. Sorry, yes, ma’am. He took his key, said he’d get the car himself.” Lacey dug in her purse for a five to give the young man, but he declined. “He took care of that, ma’am.” She gave him the five anyway and set out through the warm early evening, her heels clicking against the sidewalk as she crossed the street to the club’s parking lot.

Hunter leaned against the passenger side of his car, his dark head

and broad shoulders bent in an attitude of pondering his shoes. The soft blacktop masked the staccato tap of her heels, giving her time and the welcome opportunity to study him as she approached. Both of his hands were shoved in his front pockets, his big hands balled into fists if she was any judge of such a thing. He'd loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top two buttons of the dress shirt. For the first time she noticed that the suit jacket sat a little awkwardly, the center seam straining at his shoulders.

A wave of self-reproach rushed up from her belly and into her throat. She'd been so busy assuming he wouldn't want to go to the party with her then so delighted that he did that it simply hadn't occurred to her that he might not feel comfortable there.

Stupid, stupid Lacey. Stupid and thoughtless.

"I quit smoking six years back," he said when she drew too near for him to even pretend to overlook the swish of her skirt. "Nights like this I wish I had a reserve pack in the car."

Oh, God. She looked at the big hands, still tightly balled in his pockets. A Lexus SUV loomed at her back, stirring memories of their first night together. Hunter stood so close she felt the wool of his pants leg against her calf, close enough to touch if waves of discomposure weren't radiating from him.

Brainless. Naïve. Definitely obtuse. Sometimes a liberal arts degree wasn't such a good thing. She had a substantial vocabulary with which to label her current sense of air-headed privileged ignorance.

"Hunter, Vince was completely out of line," she began, keeping her voice soft, even.

"Vince. That's right. Vincent James or Jameson, or something like that. Two first names and a world class prick attitude, that's what I remember from the arrest." Clearly whatever happened between the two men wasn't a run-of-the-mill traffic stop.

He blew out his breath. "Shit. What did he say? I know he didn't tell you the truth."

“He said you arrested him on a trumped up charge. Something about a parking violation.”

Hunter laughed, then directed his stare at her, his normally straight shoulders hunched as he leaned against the car. His eyes seared into her, fury warring with something so painful she didn’t dare look away. “I arrested him in February for picking up a prostitute downtown. I watched him negotiate with the girl, who was a seventeen-year-old runaway, and followed them down an alley. She was on her knees, unzipping him when I hit the siren.” He let out an involuntary laugh. “Talk about deer in the headlights. The guy was fucking freaked.”

The image his words provoked was so vivid and ugly she did look away. Hunter’s tight voice broke into her thoughts. “Not exactly Oak Grove. He must have friends in high places because the prosecutor declined to press charges. Never made the paper, either.” He looked out over the roofs of the Lexuses, BMWs and Mercedes. “I should 85

have stood my ground. Assholes like Jameson always back down. You just never know when. I didn’t want to make a big scene and fuck up your deal.” My God, he was still thinking about her? Lacey found her voice. “Hunter, I’m competitive but I don’t ever need a deal so badly you should back down from a confrontation with anyone.”

The sardonic look on his face told her he wasn’t convinced. “How do you know *Philip* anyway? He owns Western States, right?” The edge still wasn’t gone from his voice, or from the set of his shoulders, so she made light of the connection. “I worked in his bank after I graduated from college.”

“That’s not the whole story. Laetitia.”

Did *anything* get by him? “He’s my father’s godfather,” she admitted.

“Jesus Christ.” He shook his head. “Except for the baseball, most of that went right over my head. Mortgage backed securities and the derivatives market.”

“It’s an area of expertise. Doctors and architects look just as lost most of the time when Dan Brunhill gets going on the economy,” she said.

Several long moments passed. Finally he took a deliberate breath and blew it out as he pulled his hands from his pockets to run one palm over the bristly top of his head.

This time when he looked at her, he seemed to have come to terms with the night.

But she hadn’t. “I’m sorry, Hunter. It was inconsiderate of me not to think about how you might feel there. You just seem… indestructible to me. Like you can go anywhere. Do anything.”

“In uniform, yeah. In a suit…” He shrugged. “Why did you even want me there?” She fiddled with the beads on her evening bag, knowing there was no way to tell him the truth without sounding needy, or arrogant, or both. “I wanted you to see who I am. What I do. You see me in nice clothes for dinner and you see me…”

“…naked and begging?”

“I don’t beg,” she said primly. The look shot her was pure green-eyed devil, with a knowing smile to boot, so she hastily moved on. “I wanted you to see that I’m not just money and a nice house. I work hard and I’m good at my job.”

“I see that, Lacey,” he said, his voice gruff. “I saw that before this disaster.” Before she could reassure him again he reached across the small space separating them and drew her up against his lean, hard body to press a kiss into the top of her head. She braced her hands, one still holding her clutch, against his chest and tipped her head up in the universal attitude of asking for a kiss.

The one she got, slow, hot and possessive, completely disregarded their public location. He cupped her head above the knot of her

hair and urged her lips open for the leisurely thrust of his tongue. Weak in the knees, her fingers curled into the crisp cotton of his shirt.

Laughter intruded into her awareness and Hunter tore his mouth from hers. “Get in the car, beautiful,” he growled before nipping her earlobe. Desire zipped through her, 86

but the presence of several departing guests two cars down forced her to stand demurely while he unlocked and opened her door.

Silence reigned on the drive home, but despite the tumultuous evening, it wasn’t tense or unpleasant. As usual, Hunter kept his thoughts to himself as he drove. Perhaps the night had already been locked away in whatever compartment assigned to it in his brain. She would have danced naked on Mrs. Duffy’s lawn before she asked him what he was thinking.

She studied his profile, rhythmically illuminated by the passing streetlights. Certain moments in her life stood out in her memory. Graduating from Smith. Marrying Davis in a ceremony so beautiful and flawless she’d been sure the marriage would last forever. The moment he told her he was moving out. Signing the papers to close her first multi-million dollar deal. Signing her divorce papers.

And now this moment, in the dark interior of Hunter’s car, strips of white light and the green dashboard lights bringing his angular cheekbones and full lips into relief. A certainty, sure but not entirely welcome, stole through her soul. She was falling for this honorable man who protected her image at the expense of his own. Falling, and falling hard, despite all common sense and advice to the contrary.

At that moment she prayed he didn’t ask her what she was thinking.

He backed into her driveway, but Lacey was too preoccupied to wonder why as she got out of the car. Compounding the bewilderment of a soul-altering realization, her keys were

enmeshed in the silk folds of her clutch. She nearly bumped into the back corner of the car before coming up short against Hunter's big body.

"Oh!"

One hand wrapped around her upper arm, he opened the door and unceremoniously shoved her into the back seat. He climbed in and closed the door behind him. Her purse dropped to the floor when he shifted on top of her and claimed her mouth. When his hand stroked up her thigh she gasped, "I can't wrinkle this dress!"

"Okay," he said obligingly and pulled her up. Legs and arms bumped and tangled up as they shifted around, and his hand slipped under her skirt. When his fingers brushed her mound, his gaze flashed to hers, his eyes glittering in the near darkness.

"You're not wearing panties. You've been naked the whole night?"

"You're not the only one who can arrange a surprise," she said with an arch smile.

"Is that a crime?"

Heavy-lidded jade-green eyes met hers while her flirtatious words echoed in the car. His breathing slowed. Suddenly he seemed two sizes larger again, making the space seem smaller, tighter and filled with Hunter. Seated in the middle of the wide seat, he reached for her left hand and put it on the back of the driver's headrest. To maintain her balance she automatically reached for the passenger's headrest with her right. He grasped her waist in a move reminiscent of shifting her so he could get to the bar at Buff, and before she knew it, she straddled his lap, her back to him. The position 87

left her with a great view of her driveway and her neighbor's dark house, but unable to see him at all.

His warm fingers brushed the bare skin of her shoulder blades, trailing over the acutely sensitive skin to find the zipper of her

dress. Her inability to see him heighten the zipper's rasp in the black quiet of the car, her own shallow breathing, the feather-light brush of his rough fingers as he placed both hands inside the loosened fabric and pushed it down and away, releasing her breasts into the rapidly warming air.

Leaning forward to lick a wet path up her spine to the nape of her neck, he reached for the sensitive skin at her elbows then trailed his fingers along the soft flesh of her upper arms and shoulders, then down to her breasts.

A frisk, she thought as her heart rate went rabbity and her nipples hardened. It was a silent, teasing frisk, a playful response to her silly question, but there was nothing playful about his mouth, now sucking at her nape, or his hands cupping her breasts.

His thumbs brushed over her nipples until they ached for more.

Her head dropped back as she lifted her hands to cover his with her own and urge him to harder caresses. Quick as lightening he slapped his hands over hers, the clap of flesh against flesh flashing out into the car as he pushed them back to the headrest.

Hands where I can see them. He didn't say it, not with words, but the message came through loud and clear.

A moan Lacey knew she must have made because it was entirely too breathy and aroused to be Hunter echoed in the hot air. Satisfied with her compliant position, Hunter's hands slid over her ribs and down the groove of her spine to grasp her skirt and tug it up. Moving with authoritative slowness he exposed her ass, unhurriedly tucking the silk fabric under itself to catch at her waist.

His breathing came more rapidly as he kneaded her bared buttocks, scraped his fingernails over them, then urged her up and forward. The brush of his knuckles against her soft wet folds made her whimper, but she heard the rub of a button against gabardine, his zipper, more metallic than hers, the rustle of soft cotton against hair-roughened skin. He bumped up against her, the heat of his shaft a tantalizing pressure against her ass while a slipping sound meant he was withdrawing his wallet from his pocket. Then, the

distinct rip of a condom wrapper tearing.

And there she waited, docile, poised above him on the car seat, her thighs spread, the long muscles trembling. Waited while he rolled the condom down while undoubtedly staring at her bare bottom. The sultry air inside the car wrapped around them in a thick, erotic fog while her nipples and clit throbbed in anticipation of his touch.

His blunt shaft nudged a couple of times, the angle unfamiliar, until he found the right, yielding spot. Then both hands wrapped around her hips in a no-nonsense grip and pulled her down, seating himself to the hilt inside her. The action was slow, sure, flush with male prerogative and a dark, enigmatic air of control that wiped all thought from her brain.

"Like that," he said. When she dutifully repeated the exact pace, her hands braced against the seat backs, her entire attention focused on the stroke of his shaft inside her and the mysterious way the air trembled in anticipation of his voice, he added in an authoritative rumble, "Good girl."

Molten desire streaked through her body as another sound, too soft to be a groan, too deep to be a whimper, rent the air. The undercurrent of the pleasure building between her thighs surged along every nerve as she moved, carefully maintaining his exact tempo despite a building need to hasten the rhythm. He left one hand on her ass while the other cupped her breast, the fingers alternately pinching and plucking her nipple. She tossed her head back and felt her carefully styled hair come loose from its knot, tendrils caressing her back.

His breath caught, then his hand gripped her hip and urged her faster, harder. The orgasm built and built and built, fragments of thought fueling it. Her submissive position. The silence, punctuated by the soft grunts now coming from his throat, her own pleading gasps. Her hands, firmly gripping the headrests. The way he'd

handled her. The terrifyingly arousing way he'd handled her.

With no warning his fingers trailed up her thigh, making her shudder. When they found her clit a lightning flash of lust speared through her and within moments intense, orgasmic waves radiated from her center to her skin.

She came back to herself to feel insistent thrusts before his last soft grunt melted into a stuttering groan. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched as his features softened from tense anticipation into release. He dropped his head back, his fingers tightening on her hip in time to the pulses inside her.

His chest rose and fell at a slowing pace, his muscles relaxing under the layers of fabric—jacket, shirt, tie. He lifted his head, then reached forward to tuck one loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Damn, beautiful," he said.

Together they shimmied her dress back into place, then he zipped her up and reached for the door. A chorus of crickets and the wind in the leaves greeted her when she climbed out, awkward and stumbling on jellyfish legs. Inside the car Hunter dealt with the condom and zipped up.

"Coming in?" she asked when he got out and closed the rear door.

"Can't," he said ruefully. "I'm working overnight." She gaped at him. "But it must be after eleven…you're not…you came to the party with me."

"You wanted me there. I was there."

The chasm that opened on the way home yawned at her feet again. To cover emotions she didn't want him to pick up on she scolded him gently. "You should have been sleeping."

"I caught a couple hours' before I picked you up. I'll be fine." 89

He waited until she opened the door and tilted her head up to his

for a quick kiss.

On impulse she stopped in the open door and said, “Is this normal?”

“Which part?” he asked with a grin.

“Very funny. This,” she said, tilting her head at the back of the car. “The…heat. Is that normal?”

The grin disappeared. “Normal for who?”

“People in general, I guess. New couples.” He looked at her, now stone-faced.

“You,” she said, finally getting to the heart of her question. She was grateful the darkness covered the flush flaring in her cheeks.

Before answering he opened the driver’s door and braced one arm on the edge.

“Why?”

He’d go to a function with her. He’d take her in a parking lot, in her kitchen, in the back seat of a car. History was pretty well off-limits. She knew almost nothing about his background, previous girlfriends, anything about his family beyond his father. As much as she knew there was sheer coincidence. But just because *she* was falling, something she knew she shouldn’t do, didn’t mean *he* was making the same mistake.

“Never mind. It’s none of my business,” she said. She tossed her purse on the washer in the mudroom.

“It’s not normal for me.”

“You don’t have to say that because I put you in an uncomfortable position,” she said. *Again. Shut up, Lacey.*

“You think I’d lie to you?”

Fifteen years of working in a highly competitive, male-dominated environment taught her many things about the delicate male ego.

Questioning a man's honor was asking for trouble. "No."

"You're not the only one going through a whole list of firsts in this relationship, Lacey." He looked at his watch. "I gotta go. The shift LT's gonna chew my ass as it is.

Later, beautiful."

She stood in the doorway, her mouth literally hanging open, and watched him drive away.

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Chapter Nine

Lacey tiptoed through the piles of large shopping bags strewn on La Java's brick patio and set a large iced tea and two packets of sweetener in front of Claire. She settled into her own wrought iron chair and removed the plate holding slices of chocolate chip banana bread from the top of her cup, then sipped her mocha. They'd been lucky to get a table. The coffee shop's outdoor seating was crowded with people soaking up the early fall sunshine after taking advantage of the back-to-school sales at the neighborhood boutiques.

"Thanks, sweetie," Claire said. She dumped the sweetener packets into the tea and stirred with the long-handled spoon. "Wow. Out shopping alone on a Saturday afternoon. It feels weird. No kids, no sling, no stroller, no diaper bag. We used to do this all the time, right? Ah, the good old days."

"Things change," Lacey said with a smile. "I take it your new nanny is working out?"

"She's great," Claire said as she set the spoon on the table. "I kept telling myself I was either old or lazy. I managed the entire technology infrastructure for a multinational corporation. Why am I now too tired to watch TV at the end of the day?"

"You had a team of nine highly educated, experienced professionals working for you," Lacey pointed out as she split the chocolate chip banana bread in half and slid a portion across the table to Claire. "Now you have two children, a husband who works sixty hours a week and one college student working afternoons and the occasional Saturday."

"Sixty hours is a good week. It's been more like seventy lately. But I don't want to talk about me. I want to talk about you." Claire narrowed her eyes at Lacey as she bit into a slice of banana bread. "I hear you showed up at the entrepreneur's cocktail hour at the

Met with a very silent tall, dark and handsome type."

"I'm glad provide fodder for the grapevine," Lacey said. "I'd missed two quarters in a row so I had to go. I wanted some company."

"So you took Hunter, who's probably never set foot in the Met in his life, rather than one of the dozen eligible bachelors from the hospital fundraiser?"

"I'm not dating any of those eligible bachelors." Claire's blonde eyebrows shot halfway up her forehead. "Are you dating Hunter?"

"What else would you call it?" Just a bit defensive, Lacey held up a forestalling hand when Claire opened her mouth. "Don't answer that question. You know what makes me feel old? Trying to figure out the lingo. Are we dating? Hanging out? Friends 91

with benefits? Hooking up? In a relationship? I'm too old to have a boyfriend.

Boyfriend feels like I'm passing notes in study hall and hoping for a date to prom."

"What do you call him?" Claire asked around a mouthful of banana bread.

She thought about as she sipped the mocha and watched the window shoppers examine the jewelry in The Coop, the local artist's cooperative showroom across the street. "My lover," she said finally.

Claire's head came up sharply, her eyes wide. "Oh." Her best friend sat quietly for a few moments, using her fork to cut off the darkened top of the banana bread. Lacey flashed back to the first day of kindergarten at Salton-Hodges Academy where she'd watched Claire pinch the crusts off her homemade peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the lunchroom. Lacey had the school lunch but loved peanut butter and jelly. She'd swapped half her tater tot casserole for half of Claire's PB&J, beginning a friendship that had

lasted thirty-one years and counting.

Based on three decades of experience, she knew her best friend's slightly furrowed brow and unusual silence meant only one thing. "Go ahead and say it. You think I'm making a mistake."

"Mistake isn't the right word," Claire hastily demurred. "I do think you're much more emotionally involved in this…this…relationship than he is. I don't know Hunter but I know his type. I also know guys in the market for something long-term aren't looking at Buff. They're at church or in the grocery store or online dating sites. I met Julian at a Young Professionals meet-and-greet, not a bar."

"You've seen Hunter," Lacey said. "We were out to dinner last week and the waitress all but propositioned him before she even took his order. Why would he keep coming back for sex with me of all women, let alone go to the Met with me, if it didn't mean something to him?" *If I didn't mean something to him…*

"It's totally out of character," Claire agreed. "That's what worries me. There are rules for things like this and you two aren't exactly following them." Despite her growing feelings for Hunter, Lacey had to agree. They were both in unexplored territory. She knew nothing about the emotional consequence of casual sex.

He knew next to nothing about forging a long-term relationship. The chances of one of them making a total mess of the situation were very, very good.

Claire reached across the table and clasped Lacey's hand. "Sweetie, I'm not trying to rain on your parade. Hell, I'm the one who suggested you have a little fun. This, however, is beyond fun and now I'm afraid you're going to get your heart broken."

"Well then Hunter will be the second man to break my heart as well as my second lover," Lacey said. Her casual laugh sounded just a bit brittle to her ears, so she returned Claire's grip. "I'm enjoying myself with someone I actually like. That sounds like a win-win to me."

"It's okay to like him," Claire said. "You should at least like the guy

you're sleeping with. Just…be careful before you go all the way from like to love, okay?" 92

Liberating Lacey

Well, that was the tricky bit, because she was already halfway there. Every time he made himself just a little more available, opened himself even the tiniest bit, she fell a little further.

You aren't the only one going through a whole list of firsts in this relationship.

Given that on a good day Hunter was as inscrutable as the Sphinx, his remark could mean anything. She could daydream all she liked, but he probably meant sex. Hunter didn't talk about escapades with previous girlfriends any more than he talked about his personal life and he seemed as shocked as she was by the pheromone charged intensity that ramped up with each encounter.

Of course he meant sex. Nothing more emotional than genuine affection. Certainly not love.

Claire's gentle warning reminded her that it was entirely possible she was tripping down the primrose path all by her blissfully naïve self. He'd said nothing, exactly *nothing*, about a future, about anything more than the next date. He wouldn't even leave a change of clothes at her house, for God's sake.

Use some of that business savvy in your personal life, Lacey. If you can't handle a second devastating break-up in less than two years, then for your own good learn how to separate sex from your emotions.

"You're sweet to worry, but you really don't need to. I'll be careful," she said. She set her empty mocha cup on the table, then changed the subject with a smile she had to force more than she liked. "Do you have a few more minutes? Let's go look at the new designs at the Coop."

* * * * *

“It’s going to rain.”

“It’s not gonna rain,” Hunter said, but one glance at the wall of iron-gray clouds, low and threatening over the trees at the western edge of Memorial Park told him he was delaying the inevitable. Rain was coming, and not just a random shower.

Lacey simply shook her head. “Fine. It’s not going to rain. So you watched *Knight Rider* and got interested in muscle cars?” It was pretty damn cute how she learned the lingo for things, his kit, cars, and used it. She was even picking up on cop jargon, the codes for shifts or calls. “Yeah. I had Matchbox cars, but KITT, the car on the show, was so cool. The red lights zipping back and forth under the hood, how it could drive itself. My big Christmas present that year was a toy version. I played with that car for hours, slept with it,” he said, keeping one eye on the horizon. The first sign of lightning and they were inside. “That spring I left it at the tee-ball park and didn’t realize it until it was bedtime and I couldn’t find the car. I was trying to be tough, not cry, you know? Dad and I searched for over an hour with flashlights until we found it down by the tree line.” 93

She watched him like he was saying something really important, a smile curving her pretty lips. Maybe he was. After the conversation in her driveway he knew she wanted more about him. He hadn’t talked much about his childhood or his family, because nothing good would come of that. Listening to her talk about her doting stay-at-home-mother, ballet and horseback riding lessons and debutante balls was different.

But, wearing a khaki skirt and pink top with flowers along the square neckline and her red hair left to dry in its natural waves, she didn’t look so far out of his league.

And if he kept telling himself that he just might believe it. He was delaying the inevitable for more than just the weather.

They’d both had busy weeks so he hadn’t seen her since the night of the party. He’d called after a particularly shitty day, just to hear her

voice, knowing she was about to head out to a work dinner. She didn't know how unusual that was for him. He wasn't about to tell her, not until he knew what it meant himself. After the Met Club fiasco, a walk in the park to enjoy what might be the last couple of hours of Indian summer sounded pretty safe. Tame. Three hours earlier he'd met her at La Java for a mocha for her and black coffee for him. Since then they'd walked all around Memorial Park and down to the pub for lunch.

When she suggested continuing their walk he agreed, despite the massing clouds.

They strolled through the nearly empty park as reasonable people took shelter before the rain hit. But he was used to being outside in hundred-degree heat, sub-zero temperatures, or rain and Lacey seemed to be humoring him. She held his hand when he guided her across the street after lunch and let it go without comment when he pulled away to check on a suspicious box behind a trash can.

This was easy. Too easy.

"You watched Knight Rider?" he asked as they turned north along the trees and glades lining the east side of the park. Sullen humidity pressed against his skin, but the oncoming clouds had a foreboding air of a rapid temperature change. Hunter noted the flattened bushes where they'd finally found the suspect who'd fled on foot a few weeks earlier. His scabs had quickly healed. The guy was undergoing a forced detox in jail.

"Yes, but not for the car. All the girls in my class had big crushes on David Hasselhoff."

He smirked at her. "David Hasselhoff."

"It's perfect marketing," she argued. "Action and cars for men of all ages and a hot guy for women. I bet the new series will be a hit with both."

"You think the new guy's hot?"

"I think he's young," she retorted as the wind gusted at her skirt.

“He’s probably my age,” Hunter said. He didn’t actually have any idea how old the new guy was, or even who the new Knight Rider was, but he bet the actor was closer to his age than Lacey’s. Besides, watching the blush flare in her cheeks still made him hard.

“You’re not young,” she said. “In years, yes, but not how it counts.”

That was nice, her acting like he had enough of anything for her—maturity, money, sophistication. Anything. And maybe it was true. He wasn’t young, hadn’t been since the day he learned he could trust his dad and no one else. Lacey, however, seemed to trust everyone.

She looked at the clouds, then at the empty park. “It’s going to rain,” she said again, her tone the one used by people who stated the obvious to residents of la-la land.

“It’s not gonna rain.”

She considered him for a moment, her brown eyes shining with laughter and a sheer pleasure that made him feel like a million bucks, then sat down on the cement stairs leading from the war memorial at the top of the hill. “Fine. Let’s sit in the rain.”

“It’s not going to rain,” he said, just to be ridiculous, because he was feeling ridiculous. Ridiculously comfortable, at ease in a way he rarely was with anyone other than his father, or his friends on the department. Had any woman ever enjoyed his company, just being with him, so much?

Not that he could remember. To be fair, he hadn’t given most of them a chance. He was busy with a job he loved and did work he loved almost as much with his father. To continue being fair, Lacey hadn’t really asked for a chance. She’d just kind of moved into his life. Or maybe he’d let her in. Did it matter how it happened? She was there.

Fat, cold raindrops plunked around them, eased for a moment, then

a steady rain pelted the grass, stairs and them. Within seconds the flag at the top of the war memorial hung sodden and lifeless.

Lacey looked at him, her eyes dancing. Water streamed off the tip of her nose and her hair hung in red strands. “Is this where you tell me it’s not raining?”

“Nope. Not raining,” he said from his position sprawled back on his elbows on the stairs beside her.

She threw her head back and laughed, slicking her hair back off her face as she did, then held her palms out to catch the raindrops. “I love how not-rain feels.”

“How does it feel?”

“Just like rain.”

“Who knew?”

She giggled. He could have sat there with her forever, through the rain, through the night, through the rest of his life, looking down the slope of the hill toward the street.

The rain, the lack of pedestrians and the presence of the woman at his side created a cocoon of isolation, a feeling of invincibility he normally got only on his bike at speeds so high whoever pulled him over would be forced to give him a ticket rather than the usual courtesy warning extended to a fellow officer.

On the street running at the base of the park traffic had slowed to a crawl, the cars’

windshield wipers methodically splashing.

“Look at all those confused people,” Lacey said. “They think it’s raining. They think they have to get in out of the rain. Little do they

know we're sitting here, enjoying a beautiful sunny day."

The steady rain became a downpour and turned cold as the front settled in. Hunter grabbed Lacey's hand and pulled her to her feet. "Come on. We should get home." They sprinted for the short-cut to her street, a dirt path through the eastern tree line. Lacey's flat sandals skidded on the wet grass as they ran. Her laughter slowed her down, so when he stopped under the thickest stand of cottonwoods he could find to give her a breather, she plowed right into him.

"Whoops!" she said, fisting her hand in his shirt to keep from falling over.

He caught her under her elbows, supporting her until she found her footing. She slapped her hands flat against his chest, breathing hard, her wet top clinging to her breasts. Her nipples hardened under his gaze and a hard shudder ran through her.

"Cold?" Being wet sapped body heat and they were soaked. The air temperature felt like it had dropped ten degrees in two minutes, a recipe for getting uncomfortable real fast.

Rivulets streamed over her lips then reformed to course down under her pink blouse. "Getting there," she said.

Her tongue flickered out to taste the rain. Before he knew what he was doing he had her backed into a cottonwood, his hands on her jaw and his tongue in her mouth.

She tasted of rain and chocolate-y coffee, her lips sweetly resilient as he kissed her.

It wasn't just her lips. Her entire body both welcomed and maddened him, the soft give to her breasts and stomach, the way her thighs cradled him, the brush of the baby-soft skin of her inner arm against his back. He'd always enjoyed the slow, sexy build of foreplay, loved women's bodies and all the mysterious, amazing things they could do, but with Lacey, he couldn't detach. Kissing meant he had to touch. Touching meant he wanted to crush her under him. Getting her under him meant he had to be inside her,

and when he got there the only thing that kept him from losing it and going all caveman on her was the knowledge that he'd scare her to death if he did.

Right now his prehistoric ancestors were beating drums just under the surface of his rational brain. He lifted her skirt, the fabric sodden in his fist, and pulled down her panties. She must be making up for lost time or something, because she never said no.

Asleep, tired, irritable after a bad day, whether he asked for a quickie or a marathon session that lasted four hours she never said no, and she wasn't now, either. He stuffed the wet scrap of fabric in the pocket of his cargo shorts and fumbled with his zipper.

The shorts were low on his hips, his throbbing cock getting pelted by the rain before he looked up to meet Lacey's anticipatory eyes. She'd asked if this heat was normal for him. It wasn't. If he got caught having sex in a public place by someone with a grudge or a holier-than-thou attitude, he'd get fired so fast he'd get rug burn on his ass from the carpet outside the chief's office. First the parking lot, now the park. Even her driveway 96

was considered public, with an expectation of being seen. Around Lacey his sense of self-preservation took a scarily long hike.

Today it looked like his career was safe because shitshitshit, "I don't have a condom," he said, knowing she didn't either. She'd left her purse at home.

She peered up at him through her lashes. Lacey never left the house without mascara because her short, reddish eyelashes disappeared without it. The rain had smudged the makeup around her eyes, a shockingly slutty look for her that, combined with her swollen lips and sexy gaze, did nothing to convince his cock to stand down.

"You have your wallet," she said.

He did have his wallet because he didn't care if she was as rich as the queen, if she was out with him, he'd pay for the mocha and

lunch. But while he had money, he didn't have protection. "The cupboard's bare, beautiful. I meant to buy more yesterday but didn't get to…"

He couldn't finish the sentence because she'd reached between them to stroke his shaft. Cold water streamed down her forearm, over his balls, making them tighten but he was so hot steam should have been rising from his body. Just to torture himself he cupped one breast through her shirt and thumbed the hard, thrusting nipple, kissing her while he did. She could get him off here. It wouldn't take long. Then he'd take her home, dry her off and love her up until he was ready for round two.

"Hunter."

She might have said his name twice because her voice was raised, urgent. He forced his eyes to focus, saw both intensity and hesitation in her face.

"I'm on the Pill."

He knew that, had seen the container with its twenty-eight tiny pills in her bathroom.

"I'm safe," she said and stroked her thumb over the tip.

Sure she was. Shit, she'd been with one man before him. She was the one who should be worried. He didn't keep score but even the approximate number was a fucking scandal.

She stroked him again, tip to base, before he uncurled her fingers from around his cock. "I can't think when you do that, beautiful, and I'd better be coherent for this conversation."

Obligingly she laid her hand flat on his stomach and looked up at him, complete trust and wicked temptation in her brown eyes. "I'm on the Pill. I'm clean," she said. As if he hadn't heard her.

"Fuck," he whispered. He'd resisted temptation before because kids should be wanted and mistakes happened. Because women lied about all kinds of things, birth control not the least of them. But fuck, oh fuck, now that the option was out in the open he wanted to

be bare inside Lacey. His whole body ached with wanting.

And Lacey was honesty personified.

But this meant something, meant yet another barrier between them was gone and that scared him almost as badly as he wanted to feel her slick, tight pussy close around his shaft. Skin to skin. Juicy. Hot. Meaningful.

He could say no, but there was no reason to. He'd had his annual physical last month, after he started dating Lacey, and he'd come up negative for everything. As usual. He could insist on that barrier, though. He should. Eventually this would end and there would be other partners.

He swiped his hand over his face to wipe away the rain and the thought, because if there were other lovers for him, then there would be others for Lacey.

No. No fucking way.

She laid her palms along his jaw and pulled his mouth down to hers, except he went so willingly he might as well have made the first move. "It's okay," she whispered in between flickering licks to his lower lip. "It's okay." Her hand skimmed down over his stomach, back to his aching length. "We've got options." He thrust forward into her stroking hand, grinding into her palm, but it wasn't enough. It just wasn't enough, not when the rain was so cold and he knew she'd be steamy hot along the length of his cock. He didn't want to get jacked off, not after she willingly offered slick, sultry bliss.

The rain pounded into his skin, into his head, the furious lash of water and wind drowning out everything but primordial need. Temptation drove him to slide one forearm under her ass and lift her. She spread her legs to accept him, her thighs pressing tight against his hipbones, her hot, wet sex cradling his cock. Maybe that

would be enough, a satisfying way to assuage the need pounding in his head, in his heart.

The slick caress of her swollen folds only heightened the ache. He bowed his head, giving in to roiling emotions that felt dangerously possessive. His forehead came to rest on hers. “Never done this before without a condom, beautiful,” he said.

“I believe you,” she whispered.

“I want to now. I want inside you so bad.”

“I trust you,” she said then locked her ankles at his lower back.

The sirens went off, the strobe lights flashing. Danger ahead. This couldn’t be about trust. It had to be about firsts, about feeling good, about taking Lacey wherever she wanted to go. Not trust. Never trust.

But the primitive, driving urge blasting from his little head overruled the stupid objections spinning in his big head.

He surrendered. The act went against everything in him that was a man and everything in him that was a cop but it was so fucking easy to give in to his thundering heart. He lifted her a little more, probing. She wiggled and then he was in, just the tip.

Holy fuck, it felt good. Real. Intense.

Connected.

She whimpered as her inner muscles tightened around him, ushering him in. An agonized sound, like he was in pain, forced its way out of his throat. Her smudged, glassy eyes meeting his, she rocked her hips against him and slid down, embedding him to the hilt inside her.

If heaven felt like a slick, tight fist, he was there.

For a long, astonished moment he looked down at their joined bodies. Rain ran in rivulets over his abs, streamed off her jaw and elbows. The incomprehensible decision to take her bare must have short-circuited his sense of touch, because it couldn't possibly feel that phenomenal. A slow withdrawal and thrust proved him wrong. It felt fucking fantastic, so he did it again, and again, slow and slick, all the way in.

This was too big a first to put into words, but something of his shock must have shown in his eyes because she nodded as if he'd spoken, her own gaze wild and needy, red hair clinging to her cheeks and lips. He picked up the pace, widening his stance to better get at that sweet spot inside her. Then one whimper intruded into his lust-soaked consciousness as pain, not passion.

"The bark," she gasped.

He turned them around and braced his back against the tree, balancing her ass on his forearms to hold her up, her skirt at her hips, her legs clasping his waist, her slender hands gripping his shoulders for balance. Without a flat surface, horizontal or vertical, to pin her to, it wasn't the hardest fuck, the most athletic, but the restricted movements heightened the sensations searing him. No pounding, no plunging, just stroke after short, tight, slick stroke, working the ultrasensitive head of his shaft. Driving him fucking *insane*.

She linked her hands behind his neck to kiss him and gasp into his mouth, grinding and quivering in his arms. Then she went rigid and muffled her cries of "yes, oh yes" in his wet cotton covering his shoulder.

Oh fuck, there it was, the contractions of her pussy rippling slow and hard around his bare cock. His orgasm blew through him as sudden and violent as a bomb blast. As the shudders racked him, only sheer force of will kept him from dropping them both in the wet, muddy grass.

What the hell had he just done? And how the hell would he go back to

latex?

Lacey was thinking more practically. “Put me down,” she said, her voice almost lost in the pounding rain. “I’m heavy.”

His chest heaved with silent, unexpected laughter as he slipped out of her and set her down in front of him. She leaned into his body in a completely feminine, almost submissive nuzzling gesture that hit him like a fist to the solar plexus. One arm then the other came around her, cradling her at the shoulder blades and hips. Holding her close.

This wasn’t just fun. Somewhere, somehow, without his knowledge —let alone his consent—this had become something more than fun.

“Let’s go home. I want to take a hot shower and make cocoa.” 99

That’s right. It was raining, as much as he’d playfully, stupidly denied it earlier.

Rain sheeted from the skies. They’d stood in the fall storm long enough to wrinkle his fingertips and drain most of the color from Lacey’s vivid face. Normally after sex she was flushed a pretty pink, warm and soft and languid in his arms. Now she shivered, her eyes huge and brown against paper-white skin, her bare arms rippled with goose bumps.

She looked as vulnerable as he felt.

Coming off a fifteen-year marriage, Lacey was no stranger to the trust and connection of unprotected sex. Using condoms probably felt strange to her. For him it was second nature, a purposeful defense no different from the vest or the cuffs. Now he realized he’d let slip an unconscious defense, too, one protecting him from an intimacy just as mental as it was physical. He’d been skin to skin with Lacey, in every sense of the word. He’d left part of himself inside her and he was freaked out.

He buttoned up, then led her out of the cottonwood grove, his brain

in a whirl of images and sensations that showed no sign of fading with the passage of time. One thought floated to the top of his mind as they trotted through the downpour that showed no signs of relenting. How could he expect to keep this woman at arm's length?

He didn't have the sense to get them out of the rain.

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Chapter Ten

Kelly the Indispensable hurried into Lacey's office, two large to-go cups from La Java in her hands and an uncertain expression on her face. "Do you have time for an unscheduled appointment?" she asked as she set Lacey's mocha on her desk. "You're due at an offsite…"

Her heart leaping, Lacey looked up from the spreadsheet she was finishing for the meeting. Surely it must be Hunter in Kelly's modern Danish reception area. Kelly would have admitted anyone she knew well, but while she'd hinted that the smile on Lacey's face must mean she had a new man, she'd never met Hunter and so wouldn't let him in unannounced…

"It's me, Lacey. I've got the paperwork for the Thanson-McKnight deal. It'll take five minutes."

Davis Burton, her ex-husband, stood in the doorway, a sheaf of papers tucked under his arm, both hands buried in the pockets of a Burberry raincoat she'd helped him choose two winters ago.

"Thanks, Kelly," she said, meaning both the attempt to keep Davis from ruining her schedule and for getting her a coffee.

"Thank *you*," Kelly said, hoisting her own drink in emphasis. Behind Davis's back she mouthed *sorry!* to Lacey, then closed the door.

"Five minutes is all I have, Davis." To emphasize to her words she got to her feet and began stowing her laptop cord in her briefcase, letting the fall of her hair against her cheekbone hide her face from a man who knew her well enough to see her disappointment, if he chose.

Why would Hunter magically appear in her reception area simply because she'd been longing to see his face since their walk in the park? On the way back to her house his big hand enveloped hers as they trotted through the driving rain. By the time she'd reached her

mudroom she'd been so cold her numb, stiff fingers couldn't insert the key into the lock. Seemingly unaffected by the chilled, lashing rain Hunter had opened the door, stripped her to her skin in the mudroom and bundled her into a long, hot shower.

They stood under the steaming spray until her skin turned pink and she'd stopped shaking.

Something kept him close in the shower, touching her, boxing her between the wall and his big body. Something made him carry her to the bed where he continued to warm her in a deliciously old-fashioned way, missionary style, his palm cupping her cheek and his gaze locked with hers until she shuddered under him, crying out in ecstasy. When she'd showered again after he left for his shift, she rinsed away more than sweat and her own slick fluids.

Whatever that *something* was, it hadn't led him to call her or come over in eight days, a response she considered odd given the humming, arcing electric connection forged between them that rainy afternoon in the park, then later in her bed. She'd seen the bare emotion in his eye, bemused, wary wonder flashing through his normally shuttered gaze.

And she hadn't heard from him, aside from precisely two text messages in response to her two calls, saying he'd call when he could. So much for protecting herself.

"Still buying coffee for the help?"

Davis's voice ended a train of thought that was leading nowhere, fast. Even better, no response was necessary. Lacey felt if she asked Kelly to walk two blocks to get her a mocha from La Java, buying for Kelly was the least she could do. Davis said getting coffee was part of Kelly's job and she should buy her own lattes.

Hunter would have said nothing at all.

Sensing she wasn't going to respond to an old argument, he set the paperwork, flagged with "Sign Here" post-it notes, on her desk. "I see you've redecorated.

It's…different."

She looked around as she uncapped her pen and prepared to close a seven-figure deal. Almost eight months ago she'd redone the whole office, carpet to ceiling fixtures, in a bright, airy, ultra-modern style that energized her every time she walked in the door. Davis, however, preferred the obvious old-money trappings of dark wood, heavy furniture and leather accessories.

"Thank you," she said as she flipped through pages, scrawling her name next to each sticky note. "You're looking well."

He did look well, the man she expected to grow old with. His sandy blond hair was a bit longer, the waves combed back from his face. The tie with the subtle swirls in the blue silk wasn't familiar, but the air of satisfaction was. He'd developed that shortly after moving out.

Lacey double-checked to make sure she'd signed in all the correct places then handed the paperwork back to him. "What's brings you by, Davis? We agreed another partner would handle my business."

"This is a personal visit, as well as business. I…hear you're seeing someone." She didn't pause, finding her purse and swiftly examining the contents. "I am." *Please let him be busy, not blowing me off because after the park we're in too deep.*

Emboldened, he continued. "Four different people who were at the party at the Met mentioned your date to me."

"Really?" She raised her voice. "Kelly, where are the files for the—"

"Top left hand drawer under the market analysis—"

"Got them." She inserted the files into her bag and pressed the button to send her laptop into sleep mode.

Davis wasn't taking the hint. "Yes. The general consensus is that

he's young." 102

Liberating Lacey

The general consensus? Was he actually trying to embarrass her with gossip? Amused, she met Davis's eyes. "He's of legal age."

He squared his shoulders. Lacey recognized the look he'd practiced to seem calm, cool and collected in front of a jury. "Vince Jameson said he made a fool of himself in front of Shane Baldwin."

She couldn't resist just the slightest of jabs. "Vince did," she said.

Davis gave an irritated huff at her semantics. "I meant your date." She'd spoken to Shane earlier in the week. He'd set up a time for a property tour then invited her to dinner with him and his wife. Shane's invitation specifically included Hunter. That, however, was none of Davis's business. "Really," she said again but this time with her ice-princess smile.

The son of an electrician and a teacher, Davis came from a background not all that dissimilar from Hunter's, except he'd spent the last twenty years doing his best to distance himself from a perfectly respectable family and upbringing. Highly attuned to the whims and perceptions of the people who wielded power, he picked up on Lacey's cooler tone. "I know I don't have the right, but…at your age," he began.

"I'm thirty-six, the same age you are, yet I haven't manufactured an excuse to discuss your current girlfriend, a twenty-five year old paralegal who was your employee when you began dating her."

He had the grace to flush, a brick-red color staining the newly tanned skin of his cheekbones. *Davis, Davis*, she thought, but said nothing.

"Yes she's young, but Brianna is the daughter of a VP at Central States and has a degree from Vassar."

"Meaning?"

“We both know what that means,” he said, his voice quiet.

She covered her thoughts with sliding her laptop into its protective sleeve, then her briefcase. She’d spent fifteen years serving as Davis’s native guide as he gained the polish and connections necessary to fit into the rarefied strata of society she occupied with ease. Brianna would segue smoothly into Davis’s hard-earned social life. She could identify and use a fish fork, knew who to chat up at parties, which committees and charity events to join. While young, his new girlfriend moved in their circle and had since birth.

Hunter didn’t and after the night at the Met she‘d learned not to blithely forge ahead without considering his feelings. A party of a hundred was one thing. Two couples dining together might be too intimate. The restaurant Shane proposed, Le Pain, was the best French restaurant in town, with a clientele drawn from the Metropolitan Club’s membership list and a wine list five pages long. Davis would have jumped at the opportunity to be seen with Shane Baldwin, dropped all kinds of erudite tidbits about the recent crop of Bordeaux wines. Hunter had nothing to gain from the engagement other than her gratitude for being there and he hadn’t called her for over a week.

Odds were very good she’d dine with Shane and Andrea Baldwin alone.

Much more of this ruminating and her ex, unobservant as he was, would catch on.

“Davis, I’m not really interested in whether or not he fits in with our social circle,” she said.

Only after the words left her mouth did their implication occur to her, but the look on her ex-husband’s face made the gaffe worthwhile. Apparently the thought that Lacey might choose a man for purely sexual reasons hadn’t occurred to him. She’d hooked up

with Hunter at Buff because she responded to him in a deliciously erotic, unfamiliar way, but that wasn't why she kept seeing him, or brought him to the Entrepreneurs event at the Met. She liked the sex, because she liked *him*. Hunter was about as unpretentious a human being as she'd ever met. When she was with him, *perfect* had no place in her vocabulary.

"I really do need to leave," she said when the silence made Davis's complete speechless evident. "Can you find your way out?" With one last bewildered look Davis stuffed the documents in his coat pocket and left. Lacey gave him a minute to start the short walk to his law firm's offices, then pulled on her coat and grabbed her bags.

"From now on, he needs an appointment," she said when she stopped in the reception area to button her coat. She doubted Davis would be back with a task so mundane as bringing her papers to sign but to be safe she'd remind Ernest McGovern, the founding partner in the firm, that she expected all aspects of her business to be handled by him and no one else.

"You got it," Kelly said, tossing a narrow-eyed look at the closed door.

Lacey got into her car and headed for a strip mall on the city's growing west side, driving on autopilot as she reflected on Davis's unexpected appearance and the subtle air of satisfaction he'd developed in the eighteen months since they separated. She'd done her share of begging, pleading with Davis for a reason why he would want to leave, and her share of soul-searching when he couldn't give her sensible answers. *I've met someone else* she would have understood. *I need to move on* didn't make sense to her.

His recent relationship with a much-younger cotillion queen notched the puzzle pieces together quite neatly. He wanted someone who saw him as he saw himself, successful, accomplished, well-to-do. The history he shared with Lacey, the struggle through law school, the efforts to fit into society, the long hours to make partner brought shame, not a sense of joint success. He wanted to wake up with someone who didn't remember his run-down car, his department store clothes, his need-based scholarship to Amherst.

Thinking about Davis naturally turned to her reasons for going to Buff and then to Hunter. On the surface it appeared she'd stuck to the traditional road most women in her circle followed, college, job, cars, marriage, house, vacations, better houses and cars, more expensive vacations, repeat *ad nauseam*. But she worked when she didn't need to, 104

long after Davis started dropping hints about swapping property deals for charity functions.

Her family gently bemoaned her curious exits from the superhighway of upper-class life. Rich, but working hard. In her thirties, but divorced and childless.

Comfortable at galas and events, but not the slightest bit interested in them beyond what they could do for the recipients of her social class's largesse or her business.

Hunter simply saw them as who she was. That silent acceptance liberated her in a way that the new haircut, her blatantly sexy clothes at Buff, even choosing a younger, blue collar man for her first lover couldn't. It was a rare thing to find someone who simply let her be.

She pulled into the parking lot of the strip mall, the bays still steel girders and exposed beams, but didn't see the developer's truck yet. To kill time she scrolled through messages on her BlackBerry. The usual work stuff, but nothing from Hunter.

Two clicks and scrolls brought her to his cell phone number. Her finger hovered over the button to dial, but she canceled out and locked the BlackBerry. She'd called twice.

He said he would call when he could.

Her resolve to get more pragmatic about their relationship had lasted until the rainy afternoon in the park and the unbearably intimate lovemaking afterward. Claire had warned her that sometimes casual relationships ended abruptly, that guys often

backed away if things got too serious, too scary. The intimacy of skin-against-skin sex might have been enough to make Hunter simply stop calling or texting or emailing.

He has a good reason, her heart insisted.

It takes no time to send a text message, or call and explain. A minute at most, her protective, sensible brain argued.

Her yearning heart won. *I don't care. Call. Please call.*

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Chapter Eleven

Hunter felt like shit, no two ways about it. Sleep, aspirin and a shower hadn't done much to fight back the thickly spiked hangover pounding behind his eyeballs. Dressed in jeans and a dirty long-sleeved black t-shirt because the clean white ones were too fucking bright, he slumped gingerly into his secondhand sofa and considered the bottle of Johnny Walker Black in front of him. He remembered drinking the first third immediately after going off duty at midnight. The next third, not so much. The last third beckoned to him with the fool's hangover remedy, but he knew getting drunk a second time wouldn't leave him with anything but another hangover and another sick day charged to his leave balance.

Water would help. He hadn't puked since before the shower, so he walked into his narrow, avocado green galley kitchen and gulped down a glass of tap water and waited a minute. His stomach didn't protest, so he had another, then ran a third and went back into the bedroom to fumble his cell phone from the pocket of his uniform shirt, lying in a heap on the floor. The cream vinyl shades were down, blocking out enough daylight to keep his brain from exploding and let him see the clock on his cell phone. Just after six p.m. and surprise, surprise, he had voicemail.

He set down the glass on the battered wood dresser he'd had since he was a kid, then sat on the edge of his unmade bed to flick open the phone and retrieve the messages. One message was from his dad, asking if he could help with a cabinet install.

Yeah, he could do that…when the pound of a hammer wouldn't shatter his head into tiny fragments. One from a buddy reminding him about the UF pickup game. One from his sergeant, asking if he'd gotten the plague because he hadn't used a sick day in fourteen months.

The mock sarcastic question made him smile, then wince as the

muscles in his forehead moved. Sergeant Langley, a five foot tall blonde female, was the best superior officer he'd ever worked for. She ran a tight crew and while she could dish out shit with the best of them, he knew why she'd really called because she eased up on the sarcasm at the end of her message, reminding him to call her if he needed anything.

The last message was from Lacey. He recognized the number when the automated voice read it off. The first five seconds of the message were silence, then her voice came soft and tentative.

"Hunter, it's me…I know you're busy…and you said you'd call when you could…but would you just let me know you're okay? I…" She said something unintelligible then finished with, "Okay, bye."

He automatically flipped the phone closed, then winced at the unreasonably loud clap it made. Rubbing his forehead against the shooting twinge turned into rubbing his forehead in disgust. She'd called twice before. He'd kind of blown her off.

No *kind of* about it. He'd blown her off for a few days, only to discover he missed her, so like an idiot he'd blown her off for a few more. To his dismay, missing became *wanting*. Then the worst day of his working career hit him. The best part about being a cop was that he never knew what was coming when he got in the car.

Some days that was the worst part of being a cop.

A hangover was almost as good being shitfaced at taking his mind off what happened, but now *what happened* was back at the front of his mind and his stomach didn't feel so good. He shoved the phone in his pocket and made his way back to the sofa and sat down. The bottle sat there, a sullen reminder of his weakness, so he got to his feet and poured the last third down the kitchen sink. The amber liquid swirled hypnotically over the dulled, scratched stainless steel, then disappeared, leaving behind a wet sheen and a charred wood

smell. He pitched the empty in the trash.

Back in the living room he looked around the apartment, his head throbbing and his stomach heaving. The smell of vomit and dull alcohol sweat wasn't too strong in the living room. The bedroom stank, pure and simple. He opened the windows but despite the cool air, there was no breeze. It would take hours for the smell to dissipate.

The simplest solution was to go out. He had his jacket on and keys in hand before he stopped at the door. He knew where he needed to go but seeing Lacey in his condition meant answering questions he wasn't sure he wanted to answer. He could call a couple of other guys from the department and go out, but he didn't have the energy. A situation like this was one of the few when he wouldn't drop in on his dad.

And he owed Lacey an explanation.

Still, he hesitated. It only took one or two times of being the downer at the party to realize you didn't dump the dirtier side of the job on civilians. You coped with the job by building a wall and you didn't let the job out from behind that barricade, or a civilian inside. He had walls, good ones, six feet thick, big stones, when he joined the department. Six years on the job and he'd built a fortress, with a moat and a drawbridge, the chain rusty from disuse.

And Lacey…he shifted his keys to his left hand and rubbed his forehead with his right. Lacey was tough, yeah, but underneath the deal shark's armor she was as clean and pretty and sweet and gentle as a woman could be. Telling her would be like tracking dog shit through June Cleaver's kitchen.

Stop thinking, Anderson. Just drive over there. It's not like you haven't shrugged shit off for people before. Just go, apologize and make another date with her.

That made sense. He decided against the motorcycle, not certain his stomach could handle the vibrations, and got in the Charger. Acid rock blasted from the speakers, making him yelp before he turned the volume down.

“Fuck, you’re in bad shape,” he muttered.

The blinding glare from the LED traffic lights burned his retinas so he put on his sunglasses even though it was full dark. When he got to her house he noted the dim light emanating from the living room window. Maybe she wasn’t home. That was the light she had on a timer so she didn’t come home to a dark house when she worked late. Better park on the street rather than block her out if she wasn’t home.

He still had to knock, had to know he’d tried. His boots thunked on each step, rattling the pumpkins decorating the risers. He had her key, on his ring so he wouldn’t lose it. But he didn’t use it and rang the doorbell instead.

Sheer delight flashed in her eyes when she opened the door, but she clamped it down.

Not good. “Hey,” he said.

“Hi,” she said, but she didn’t open the door and invite him in.

Commitments weren’t really his thing, but he knew enough about women to know how to start this conversation. You didn’t have unprotected sex with a girl, twice, then go almost two weeks without calling.

“I’m sorry,” he said gruffly as he rubbed the throbbing spot in his forehead.

She wore faded jeans and a loose gray sweater with puffy slippers on her feet. Over her shoulder he could see a glass of wine and a hardback book, open but face down on the coffee table. Soft classical music trilled from her iPod speakers. It wasn’t quite June Cleaver’s kitchen, but it was damn close.

She still wasn’t saying anything, so he continued. “I should have

called…" She just nodded, her face surprisingly blank for her and for a moment he wondered if that was it. Maybe not calling for almost two weeks was enough to end things with a woman who could do so much better than a jerk too chicken to face what was happening between them.

Instead she reached out and removed his sunglasses.

He tensed but the dim, subtle pools of lamplight illuminating her favorite reading spot didn't send sharp pains spearing through his head. The urge to look away was strong. He'd been hung over enough to know not to look in the mirror. Between the whiskey and the vomiting the whites of his eyes were probably so bloodshot they glowed.

One moment slipped by as he met her eyes and she searched his face. Another.

Then she handed him his sunglasses, stepped back and opened the door to him.

Relief made his stomach lurch almost as hard as the hangover had. He stepped in, shrugged out of his leather jacket and toed off his boots while she went to the kitchen.

She came back with a glass of ice water. "I'll get the aspirin if you need it," she said.

"I'm good for now," he said and eased into the soft leather at one end of the sofa.

She settled herself at the other end, her back to the arm, her feet tucked protectively under her and her arms wrapped around her knees. "That looks like a spectacular hangover," she commented idly.

"It is," he said, and waited. The single cushion between them felt

like a mile, and the silence like a brick wall. When it became clear she wasn't going to say anything, he said, "I guess I should go first."

She just nodded, a small smile on her lips, and reached for her wine.

He didn't know how to start, what to say, so he started like he was reading his report. "Tuesday afternoon I was the first officer on scene of a child abandoned at a local superstore. When I get there the manager tells me the kid's been wandering around for a couple of hours. They'd paged for a parent but no one came. So they set the kid up in the office with some graham crackers, a juice box and a couple of Matchbox cars, and started searching. No one was sick or dead in a bathroom or a storeroom, so they called 9-1-1."

He took a gulp of the water. "The kid's getting bored with pushing two cars around so his eyes light up when he sees me. I get down on his level and ask him if he knows his name. He does and he's four years old, but he holds up three fingers at first. He doesn't know mom or dad's name. All he knows is that dad brought him and left him in the snack bar with a bag of popcorn and a soda. He wandered into the toy section eventually. The staff noticed him when he basically took apart the dinosaur display to get at the T-Rex. We do all the usual stuff, call CPS, start reviewing security tapes. Sure enough, a man came in with the kid and left about eight minutes later. Ninety minutes passed before anyone figured out the kid was alone." He didn't have words for what it was like, the tiny office full of people, the manager, the woman from the snack bar, eventually two other officers and his sergeant and a weary CPS employee and this little kid, with his brown eyes and longish brown hair, cut unevenly over the ears, totally lost in the mess of trying to figure out who he was, where his parents were and what to do with him. One of the teenage employees had been playing with him but had to start her shift. The kid squirmed and grabbed himself. Sergeant Langley asked the kid if he had to go potty and he nodded, but then pointed at Hunter.

I want him to take me, he said.

Hunter started to protest but Langley, on the phone with the county records department, just looked at him like *for fuck's sake, Anderson.*

Easy for her to say. She had four kids. Hunter didn't even have plants. The boy seemed to know the basics so Hunter just stood outside the stall, then helped him wash his hands. The kid was playing with the water, splashing his shirt and Hunter's cuffs before Hunter shut off the water and handed him a couple of paper towels.

When's Daddy coming back?

He'd had the wind knocked out of him plenty of times, but never without being physically hit. A body slam. A fist to the gut. Something. When he got his breath back all he had was a shitty answer.

I don't know.

He didn't bother to say something made-for-television, like *We'll find your daddy,* because he knew how futile that kind of search was. When a parent wanted nothing more to do with a kid, it was shockingly easy to just disappear. His face must have showed something when he got back to the office because Sergeant Langley told him to go outside and double check the parking lot for the father's vehicle. An unnecessary task, but he was grateful for the distraction.

He came back to the silent, warm room, Lacey curled up with an empty wine glass, watching him. How long had he been staring off into space, lost in memory?

"I've taken kids from homes plenty of times," he said hastily. "The first time or two sucked. Everyone's crying and screaming and you have to wait for someone to bring you a car seat from the precinct. After that, I was good with it. When mom's a meth whore and dad's gone or beating the kids and there's no heat or water or food, it's better for the kid in the end," he finished, because yeah, the foster care system just rocked.

"I would imagine it's different when a father abandons his child,"

she said.

“Yeah,” he said, staring unblinkingly at the French doors to the sun porch because the last thing he wanted to do was cry. “Yeah. It’s different. So, ah, that’s why I haven’t called.”

She didn’t challenge him, or his house-of-cards timeline. She didn’t dig for the details, or bemoan the state of the American family, or even ask where the kid was left.

Not much of a praying man, he thanked God for her silence because right now the moat was dry, the drawbridge down.

But when the silence stretched, then doubled back in on itself, he took a deep breath, broke his stare and looked at her. She sat forward and put her hand on his, the tight clasp warm and comforting. They sat like that, breathing together, until he cleared his throat and rubbed his forehead again. His stomach rumbled in a reassuringly normal way. As easily as she’d held his hand she broke the contact, leaving a warm palm-sized patch to cool without her touch.

After pushing to her feet she picked up their empty glasses and nodded toward the kitchen. “Come on,” she said. “You sound hungry.” He was, so he followed her into her kitchen and watched as she fried bacon to make a thick grilled cheese and bacon sandwich for him, keeping quiet the whole time. The silence, broken only by the soft clink of utensils as she worked, settled his nerves and the greasy meal went down easily. She loaded the dishwasher while he scoured and oiled her cast iron pan for her. By then it was nearly ten.

“Are you working tonight?”

He shook his head. “Can I stay?”

In the past he wouldn’t have asked. She would have asked, or he would have just stayed because after the first night, he was ass-over-elbows down that slippery slope.

Tonight, he felt like he should ask. She’d cooked for him. She hadn’t

kissed him.

A soft wariness in her eyes, she leaned against the cabinets between the sink and the stove and crossed her arms over her chest. “Why didn’t you call?” He’d heard that before from other women, usually after a lead-in statement of *I thought we were serious* or *I deserve better than this*. *If you really cared* or some other form of guilt trip followed. He should have known better than to think he was off the hook. Part of him was seriously pissed that someone with Lacey’s manners would take advantage of a vulnerability he showed to almost no one.

The drawbridge slammed closed. “So I have to promise to call if I want to stay?”

“Of course not,” she said. “You can stay whether you promise to call or not. But I’d like to know.”

Apparently belligerence didn’t work any better on Lacey than it did on him and he owed her the explanation. She deserved it, but Christ, this relationship shit was hard.

He looked away, then back at her. “I was spooked.” Smart, savvy Lacey knew what he meant. “We can use condoms if you prefer,” she said, her whole demeanor gentling. “One heat of the moment decision doesn’t have to become an ongoing habit.”

But she already had…

“That’s not what spooked me,” he said, although that had been some of it. What spooked him was how the lack of a barrier ratcheted up not only the physical sensation but also the pound of his heart, the inability to get air into his lungs.

It was a half-answer at best, but she didn’t attack, just came to stand in front of him to brush her lips over his. “Are you spooked now?” Given the rollercoaster ride of the last twenty-four hours, he

thought it best to consider the question seriously, so he took stock. Muscles relaxed, heart thudding along at its normal rate, palms dry, stomach happily digesting his first meal in a day. The slimy, clawed tentacles reaching out from his psyche at the boy's abandonment were beginning to pull back into their lair. The lick of desire he felt whenever he was with Lacey sent heated tendrils along his nerves. Normal. He felt reassuringly normal. And tired. Alcoholic stupors weren't restful.

"No," he said eventually. "I'm not spooked now."

"Fair enough," she said, then turned off the light over the stove. They made their way upstairs. He stripped and watched her nightly routine, his head braced on his hand as he stretched out what he was beginning to call "his side of the bed". Face washed, teeth brushed, clad a long-sleeved ankle-length cotton nightgown pulled from under her pillow, she climbed into bed and curled up with her back to him. He curved around her, buried his face in the thick, cool fire of her hair and succumbed to sleep.

* * * * *

The battle had been hard fought and he'd conducted himself with honor. He pulled back the tent flap and walked in to find his share of the tribute waiting for him. His king had rewarded 111

him generously with a gold cup and platter on the low platform, the armor from his slain enemies stacked against one wall.

A woman.

She was naked, her red hair tumbled around her shoulders, her brown eyes serene as she waited on his blankets. Her bound hands rested her lap, her legs drawn up and to one side. Such tranquility under extreme duress belonged to the protected daughter or wife of a powerful man.

Now, thanks to the fates of war and his conduct in battle, she was his. If he wanted her.

Despite his exhaustion heated interest expanded in his chest. She was beautifully composed and he found that poise intriguing. Battle-worn and experienced, he wasted no energy, certainly not on subduing an unwilling captive. But his king, who had long since stopped including a warm body in his share of the spoils, knew him well. This woman might suit him.

He unbuckled his sword belt, splashed water on his face and hands, then sat back on his heels in front of her as he used a rag to dry off. She watched him without flinching, although color crept over the curve of her breasts and into her cheekbones as he considered her. The blush, simple and telling, made his cock harden.

He tossed the rag to the side and braced his palms on his thighs. "What's your name?"

"Laetitia."

An odd name, oddly familiar to him, oddly suited to her. With one finger he lifted her chin a fraction of an inch. "You know what we will do here, Laetitia," he said.

His "prisoner" met his blunt challenge by lifting her chin another fraction of an inch, clear of his finger, before answering. "Yes."

Clearly not a virgin to scream and cry. He avoided the camp followers but found no pleasure, as many of his compatriots did, in raping defenseless girls.

After a day of bloody death the long-ignored desire for life-affirming skin-to-skin contact surged through him. He yanked his tunic over his head and bore her back into the blankets.

"A bargain," she said, her thighs tensed against his hand, her bound hands braced against his chest.

"You have nothing to bargain with," he pointed out, amused by her effort.

"I will hold nothing back to create what comfort I can in your life," she said, looking him directly in the eye, "and in your bed."

He switched tactics, trailing feather-light touches along her tightly closed legs. The muscles trembled under his fingers. “And in return?” She smiled, mystery and an age-old awakening in her eyes. “I reserve the right to beg a boon now and again.”

“And if I refuse?”

Trapped between the ground and his body, her shrug was small but eloquent as she acknowledged the futility of her effort. “I have no desire to be beaten into submission, but your pleasure will be greatly diminished.”

He wouldn’t beat her. He’d send her back to the king, who would casually gift her to another warrior, a thought that stuck in his craw. Her bargain, and the courage necessary to make such a proposal, appealed to him.

“What requests would you make?” he asked, curious to know what might be in the mind of this willing, experienced woman with an invulnerable aura radiating from her.

She smiled, oblique and provocative. “You must take your chances as I do,” she said.

The present pleasures tipped the scales against an unknown, future demand he might not live to consider. “Agreed.”

Her soft brown eyes glassy and eager, she lifted her bound wrists over her head and opened her thighs, offering herself to him in the most primitive manner. Long suppressed need roared through him. Assured of her willingness he gripped her wrists in one hand and pushed them into the hard earth under the blankets. With the other he smoothed her fiery hair back from her pale face, then settled between her legs, the tip of his aching cock finding warm, wet heat…

…a car door slammed and an engine turned over. A slightly shocked gasp wafted into cool, gray air, but there was nothing

unwilling about the urgent lift of feminine hips under his body…

He sank into her to the hilt, setting a slow, hard rhythm designed to assuage the craven need roiling under his skin, utterly lost in the hot plunge and slide into the tight, slick grip of her sheath…

“Oh God, yes!”

Hunter’s eyes snapped open as the pleading words shattered the trance-like impression in his mind. He paused mid-stroke, in that split second merging his dream with reality. The dry, hot air of the tent and the blankets over hard-packed earth faded into the pre-dawn light, a soft bed. But his dream captive was the real woman under him, the fragile bones of her wrists clamped in his hand and stretched over her head, her breasts round and lifted, the nipples peaked and begging for his mouth.

She dug one heel into his ass and arched into him. “Hunter, please!” Was she in every part of his head? Laetitia, savvy and bargaining as she submitted in his dreams…Lacey, hot and wet and eager in his arms…Lacey…Lacey…always Lacey. With a groan he sank into her and bent to kiss her, the electric connection arcing through him when their open, panting mouths met.

She moaned, lifting her hips to meet each pounding thrust. It felt fucking incredible, each stroke into her moist, clinging sheath coaxing the hot pressure of his orgasm up his shaft. All his pressure points tingled, his nipples, his mouth, the rapid slam of his pulse in his neck, the base of his spine where swirling pleasure gathered. Sweat broke out on his forehead, slid along his jaw and onto her collarbone.

Something must be working for her because the tenor of her gasps changed, went shallow and desperate. With a low sob she arched and came, the rough shudders making her breasts jiggle in a way that drove him over the edge. One last lunge into her contracting pussy, then he gritted his teeth and let the freight train climax slam into him.

A few moments later he let go of her wrists and dropped to the side.

“What on earth?” she began, her voice faint and trembling.

He had to force the words out through his closed throat. “I was dreaming.” About her. Holy shit. “Sorry,” he added.

“Ummmm…I want to hear about that dream.” She kissed his cheek then wriggled out from under his arm. “But not right now. I’ve got a breakfast meeting at seven.” And there was his unflappable Laetitia. Silent laughter shook him. He pulled the sheet up to his waist, drifting in and out of sleep as the shower ran and she dressed for the day. Eventually she dropped a kiss on his mouth and said, “I’m leaving. Will you be here tonight?”

“Gotta go home,” he mumbled through the easy slide back into sleep. “My apartment stinks. No clean clothes.”

That earned him a giggle, followed by another quick kiss then her heels clicked swiftly toward the doorway.

“I’ll call,” he mumbled a little louder.

“I’ll count on it,” she said.

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Chapter Twelve

Half awake as he floated in that easy place where he could still feel the remnants of dreams in his body, for the first time in a very long time Hunter savored waking up slowly, surfacing from the depths of sleep into the quiet of Lacey's bedroom.

Then he remembered what woke him. The steady rap of heels on the oak floor downstairs. Was she back?

A slim hand extended from a black suit sleeve to push open the bedroom door.

Memory surfaced through the fog of sex and sleep. Lacey was dressed in cream when she left.

Adrenaline shot through his veins, jacking him bolt upright in the bed while he grabbed for the sheet and yanked it up to his chest. The shocked gasp that came from the woman standing in the doorway easily matched his horrified chagrin, coming hard on the heels of the adrenaline surge.

Oh. Fuck.

A woman stood in the doorframe, her hand still raised as if to open the door, her mouth literally hanging open. She stared at Hunter, stark naked under the sheet and flushing as red as any teenage boy caught where he wasn't supposed to be after doing something he wasn't supposed to do.

Training compelled him to stare back, meeting eyes the same soft brown as Lacey's.

For a long moment the only sound in the room was the sound of neither of them breathing, leaving plenty of time for his first impression of the formidable Mrs. Meyers to embed itself in his brain. Her daughter had inherited her eyes, pale skin and straight spine, but Lacey's father must have the red hair because her

mother's was a chemically produced chestnut brown.

Mrs. Meyers' jaw closed with an audible snap. Hunter sucked in air, stifled the automatic impulse to pat his right hip and braced himself.

"How do you do? I'm Annette, Lacey's mother."

The Southern accent surprised him but he held up his end of the conversation.

"Hunter Anderson, ma'am." No way was he using first names just yet.

"Oh yes. Of course. I'll just…" She gestured vaguely down the hallway. "Perhaps we can continue this downstairs?"

Without waiting for an answer she turned and shut the door behind her. Hunter let his eyelids sag shut for a brief moment as he mentally ran through every curse word in his vocabulary. Then he threw back the sheet and scrambled into his jeans and t-shirt. A quick glance in the bathroom mirror told him the hangover signs were gone, thank God.

He'd gotten too comfortable here, lounging around like a rent boy while his sugar mama went to work. "Great first impression," he muttered, rubbing his palm over his unshaven jaw.

The society matron, looking every inch the part in a trim black suit and heels, was waiting for him in the kitchen, seated at the table with her legs crossed at the ankle and a cup of coffee held in both hands. Lacey must have made extra and left it for him. He weighed the ballsy appearance of getting a cup for himself, then did it. After all, she'd just found him naked in Lacey's bed. Getting a cup of coffee hardly compared and he needed the caffeine.

Mrs. Meyers watched him the whole time and gave him a pleasant

smile when he sat down next to her. Even in Lacey's sizeable kitchen he felt big, awkward and back on his heels.

"I'm sure this is a shock. My daughter didn't know I was coming over. I'm returning the necklace she loaned me last week," she said, nodding at a large dark blue velvet box. "I have my own key, you see."

Sure she did. Everyone in the entire city had a key to Lacey's house, including him.

"Lacey probably hasn't talked about me," he began, trying to figure out the best way to explain his presence in Lacey's bed when she wasn't at home. No mother wanted visual evidence of her daughter's sexual activity, even if the daughter was in her thirties.

"Oh no. She's mentioned you often. I believe you escorted her to the Entrepreneurs Association cocktail hour at the Metropolitan Club." So he wasn't Lacey's dirty little secret? "That's right," he said, unsure whether he was out in the open or just plain outed.

"You've been seeing Lacey for almost three months now?" He nodded.

"And you're with the police department?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ah." She took a delicate sip of coffee, leaving a perfect pale pink lip-print on the rim of the mug.

Silence descended again. Hunter searched for something to say, but casual conversation wasn't his strong suit even when he hadn't been shocked out of his skin.

Mrs. Meyers leaped into the breach. "Lacey's face surely brightens when she talks about you."

Couldn't they talk about the weather, or something less of a minefield than how her daughter felt about him? He made a noncommittal noise and sipped his coffee. Maybe more caffeine would kick-start his brain.

“She had a hard divorce. Very unexpected, but with both of them so focused on their careers, well… Not that I blame Lacey for Davis leaving,” she added hastily.

He left *her?* “No, ma’am,” Hunter said, because he had to say something, right?

“You know she’s thirty-six.”

“She told me first thing, ma’am,” he said, beginning to feel a little punch drunk.

“My daughter’s very brave,” she said as she looked at him, humor in her eyes. “In her shoes, well, I might have told the teensiest little white lie.” Another sip of coffee hid his amusement.

“You know she wants children,” Mrs. Meyers said, following a feint with a hard uppercut.

The amusement disappeared. No, he didn’t know. “We haven’t discussed that, ma’am.”

Mrs. Meyers seemed to remember her unorthodox introduction to Hunter because a faint blush crept into the soft, rouged skin over her cheekbones. “Well, perhaps not. But she’s not getting any younger and sometimes a woman can’t…” Ah, yes, the one instance where women did come with expiration dates. But if Lacey had a ringing biological clock she hadn’t brought it up around him. Of course, maybe she had no intention of having kids with him.

Hell, he wanted kids. Eventually. After he got married, but that wasn’t happening now and if she wanted the whole deal, the ring and the wedding and the babies now, well, they could add to the list of things he couldn’t give her.

So she’ll get them from someone else…

“You seem like a nice young man,” she said decisively, as if she’d just neatly compartmentalized him in the Lacey’s-Fling-Before-She-Settles-Down-Again box.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he replied, keeping his voice calm as he desperately searched for a way to get out of this situation. Next thing she’d be asking him who his people were and he couldn’t go there.

Mrs. Meyers stood and poured the rest of her coffee down the sink. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Officer Anderson,” she said as she gathered her purse and keys from the counter. “I’ll call Lacey later today and tell her I stopped by.” He didn’t miss the fact that she wasn’t using his first name, either. “Okay,” he said, but she was closing the door behind her. When her Mercedes pulled out into the street he shoved his feet into his boots, grabbed his jacket and headed for the Charger parked on the street. He started the car and opened his cell phone to dial Lacey’s BlackBerry number from memory.

“You said you’d call, but I didn’t expect anything this early,” she said.

“Your mother was just at the house,” he said, automatically managing the wheel, the manual gearshift and the cell phone as he reversed into the neighbor’s driveway.

“Oh, my. Were you…?”

“Nope.” He put it in first and turned down Lacey’s street, flooring the accelerator to make the light to cross Hanover and head into his neighborhood.

“Did she…?”

“Yup.”

“Oh, my,” she said again, but laughter burbled in her voice.

“Easy for you to say,” he growled. “You weren’t just caught naked in my bed by my dad.”

“True,” she said. “Oh, dear. Let me make it up to you. Have dinner with me tonight. Caffe Grazie does a fabulous lasagna.”

“I don’t know if I can eat,” he admitted, the image of Mrs. Meyers’ face, white with shock, burned into his retinas.

“The sauce includes sausage, pork and ground beef.” Oh yeah, he could eat. “When?”

“Seven? Let me just check my schedule.”

“You’d better not be driving and on that BlackBerry, beautiful,” he said as he came to a halt at the lights two blocks up from his apartment.

“It’s not illegal, is it?” she asked, effectively ducking his comment.

“It should be.” *Especially for you*, he added mentally.

“You’re driving and talking on the phone at the same time.”

“I’m trained to multitask in the car. You nearly take out the neighbor’s mailbox every time you back out of the driveway.”

“It’s how I know where the curb is. I can’t parallel park, either,” she admitted cheerfully. “My last meeting ends at six, so seven at Caffe Grazie? Do you know where it is?”

He smiled as he accelerated through the intersection. “I know it. See you, beautiful,” he said and flipped his phone closed.

It was easy to be with her, so easy he forgot about the rest of the world. Mrs.

Annette Meyers and Mrs. Duffy and the Metropolitan Club crowd and his own coworkers. The questions about Lacey had died down, eventually, after Nat Johnson found someone else to needle, but he

wasn't fooling himself. As a rule, cops defended one of their own from outsiders but were brutal within the brotherhood. He'd take anything anyone dished out and come back for more, but the thought of anyone dissing Lacey made his fists tighten.

He pulled into his lot and parked the car next to the bike. The chilly fall breeze hit him as he got out of the car. It was time to move the bike into his dad's garage, winterize it and get it under shelter until spring. He hadn't taken Lacey for a ride yet, but maybe he'd pick up a helmet for her and take her out on the first nice day in March or April.

Sometimes he wondered if he was losing his mind, so sure this wouldn't last, then making plans like it would. When he met her he'd planned on three hours with her, tops, but being with her was so easy he forgot about the future. Until Mrs. Meyers brought up kids, or he had another shitty day on the job, or had to work Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's and Easter, then missed her birthday because he got called in. A classy, savvy redhead could do better than him, for so many reasons.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he unlocked then cautiously opened the door to his apartment. The air was cool but clear of any funky smells. He couldn't say the same for the surfaces in the bathroom. With a grimace he found a sponge and some powdered cleanser under the sink. He shook the can over the counter, toilet and bathtub, then wet the sponge and got to work.

Clean his apartment, do laundry, go to the gym, call his dad back about the counter install and the motorcycle. Live his life as if the date at the end of the day with a redhead and some lasagna didn't mean anything special. But it did.

He had a problem.

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Chapter Thirteen

Lacey ducked her head against the gust of chilly October air, then brushed the layers of her hair back from her face. Expecting a high in the sixties, she wore only her lightweight black belted trench coat over a cream long-sleeved silk sheath, but the unpredictable Midwestern weather tricked her and sent a cold front scurrying through.

Eager for the warmth of the restaurant, she hurried from her car to the front door of Caffe Grazie, an intimate little Italian bistro situated in a stand-alone brick building on a busy neighborhood shopping street.

White linen cloths covered small tables and votive candles flickered next to bud vases holding a single white rose, the restaurant's signature decoration. She saw Hunter immediately, waiting for her in a booth at the back. His closely cropped brown hair gleamed in the flickering candlelight as he studied the menu. He wore dark khakis, a blue Oxford shirt and a dark green sweater. The pleasure of catching him in this rare unguarded moment, his angular face relaxed, almost anticipatory, made Lacey smile as she wended her way to the back of the restaurant.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, sliding out of the booth to stand as she approached. "I didn't see you come in."

"I slipped in as another couple left," she said. She took off her coat but kept her pashmina wrap, drawing it around her shoulders as Hunter hung her coat on the hook next to the booth.

"Cold?" he asked but without waiting for an answer he leaned down and kissed her. It wasn't a swift peck of greeting but rather a lingering welcome, with just a hint of his tongue along the lower edge of her lip.

Heat flared low in her belly. "Not anymore," she said.

His lips quirked into his familiar almost-smile as they slid into opposite sides of the booth. He reached across the table and brushed his thumb over her mouth. “A little wet,” he explained, the rough velvet of his voice contrasting with the smooth heat in his eyes.

She tucked her purse into the seat next to her and spoke through lips tingling from his touch. “Have a good day?”

“I got some stuff done,” he said with a lazy satisfaction that signaled a busy, productive day. “You?”

“Eh,” she said. “I’ve had better. Two no shows for meetings, plus a potential client went with other financing.”

He reached across the table again and gave her hand a warm squeeze. “Sorry, beautiful.”

“It happens,” she said with a shrug, but she appreciated how seriously he took her business. Davis used to say she had so much money that losing a deal shouldn’t matter, but the fierce competitor in her hated to lose even once.

Their waitress approached from the booth behind Hunter, her face brightening with recognition when she saw Lacey’s face. “Hi, stranger!” she exclaimed as she came to a stop by the edge of the table and began flipping through her order pad. “We haven’t seen you in ages! How are you, Davis? Oh!”

Her gaffe made the bubbly girl flush right to the roots of her Tinkerbell haircut but she covered it well. “Welcome to Caffe Grazie,” she said, the words coming automatically as she glanced at Lacey, wide-eyed.

“Davis and I divorced, Jen,” she said kindly. “This is Hunter.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said, then moved smoothly into the matter

at hand.

“Something to drink? Wine? Beer?”

Hunter stuck with Coke. Lacey ordered a glass of the house white and Jen bolted to get their drinks, her face flaming.

He sat back and stretched his arm along the top of the leather booth. “I take it you and Davis came here often?”

“Once a week, usually. More often if we were swamped at work,” she admitted.

He just looked at her, something she couldn’t identify dancing in his eyes.

“What? The divorce decree didn’t split up restaurants. He must not have been in either, or she would have known.”

More silence. She folded her hands on the table and gave him her sweetest smile.

“Unless your mother gave you that sweater for Christmas, let’s just agree we’re past jealousy and move on.”

The mild teasing garnered a reaction she hadn’t expected, because his eyes darkened and his body went still. “What makes you think I didn’t pick it out? I buy clothes.”

She happily took the excuse to look him over, the forest green fabric clinging to his broad shoulders and wide chest. “You’re not nearly vain enough to match a sweater to your eyes so exactly. I’ve seen you look in the mirror perhaps twice the whole time we’ve been together and both times we were…well, you weren’t looking at your face.

Hence, someone else bought it for you.”

“An ex. She worked at Macy’s and got a really nice discount.” That explained the expensive charcoal suit ever so slightly too tight over his shoulders. Department store tailors might not have the skill to handle the tapering line to Hunter’s narrow hips. “She has lovely

taste. That's cashmere," she said, stroking the smooth wool over his forearm, braced against the white linen covering the table. "Very soft and warm."

"Like you," he said, the edge fading from his gaze.

Linking her fingers with his because his hands were hot and hers weren't, she said,

"I'm surprised you can flirt with me so shamelessly after meeting my mother in such exposed circumstances."

To her relief he laughed. "She scared the crap out of me. I can't remember the last time someone caught me—"

"—naked and lounging around after some astonishingly hot sex?" He sent her a sizzling look at her bold words. "I was going to say unaware, but yeah, that works."

"Ever been caught before?" she asked, looking for another first.

"Twice. Both times by the fathers of girls I had in the back seat of my car. After the ass-chewing I got the second time I realized I didn't like being yelled at any more than I liked being interrupted, so I took things indoors."

"Until you met me?" Lacey said with a laugh intended to cover the thrill skittering through her at the mental image of a teenage Hunter seducing a girl in the back seat of a muscle car.

"Until I met you."

"And now you've met my mother. I shudder to think of what she said to you." She was telling the truth. Her mother wouldn't hesitate to quiz Hunter about his

"intentions" in her charming Southern mama way.

“She was very polite,” he said, declining her unspoken invitation to share details, or even complain, as any man caught naked by his lover’s mother might do. “The accent surprised me.”

“Mama is a Greenwood of the Memphis Greenwoods,” Lacey said, affecting a drawl as she matched his casual demeanor. “Memphis, as nearly as I can tell, is a place where women learn to deliver knock-out blows so sweetly you don’t even know you’re in the ring until you’re on your back, getting smelling salts and a cold compress. At least that’s what Davis used to say. He went toe-to-toe with my mother often enough.” The look of amused chagrin in his eyes told Lacey that for the first time, Hunter sympathized with her ex-husband. “The Memphis Greenwoods raise tough women.” She didn’t deny it. “The trick with my mother is to listen very attentively, then do exactly what you think is right. Davis never figured that out. He had to *be* right. Maybe it was the lawyer in him. But if I do what I want, she always wins. If she’s wrong she can tell herself how she raised such a smart girl to go against her mother’s advice. If she’s right, she gets the satisfaction of being right.”

“Where did you learn to handle people so well?” he asked, rubbing his thumb over the thin skin covering her knuckles.

“Health class,” she said with bright smile. “Day one was managing men by withholding sex. Day two was managing mothers.”

His face was a study in control, except for the slight quirks of eyebrow and mouth, but she had learned to read the subtle signs of displeasure or amusement. Humor danced in his eyes, around the corners of his full lips. “You failed day one, beautiful.”

“No I didn’t. I just can’t see that working on you.”

“Really,” he said. Jen set a fizzing glass of Coke in front of him.

“Besides, why would I cut off my nose to spite my face?” she added

obliquely as the waitress placed her glass of wine on the table.

He shook his head, the grin that had been threatening both corners of his mouth through their exchange finally breaking free. The rarely-seen, easy smile made her heart do slow flip-flops in her chest. She smiled in response.

Jen looked uncertainly between the two of them, clearly mystified by the conversation. “Are you ready to order? Lacey, do you still want the angel hair with Bolognese…”

“Yes, please,” she said.

Jen turned to Hunter with an expectant look.

“I’ll try the lasagna,” he said.

After Jen collected the menus and left, he reached forward and encircled her wrists with his warm fingers. “What makes you think withholding sex wouldn’t work on me?”

She shrugged, the blood heated by his stroking thumbs inching through her veins with each pulse of her heart. “You just don’t seem like you’d take no for an answer.” His eyes widened ever so slightly. “Hey. No means no. Period. Being manipulated that way pisses me off, but I wouldn’t—”

She cut him off. “Of course! That’s not what I meant. I meant you’re very, very persuasive and I doubt I’d resist for long if you set your mind to convincing me.”

“Say no sometime. Let me persuade you.”

His fingers were strong, warm fetters around her wrists. Her heart stopped beating for a long, aware moment, then she shied away like a spooked horse in search of safer ground. “What exactly were you dreaming about this morning?” He used his thumb to stroke the sensitive base of her wrist. “Sex. What else?”

“Just sex?”

“Why do you want to know?” he asked, an uncharacteristic flush in

his cheeks.

“Because waking up to you pushing my nightgown up and my wrists over my head was another spontaneous first for me. I want to know what inspired that.”

“Remember the movie *300*, about the Spartan battle at Thermoplyae?” he asked, still focused on her hands, limp in his strong grip.

“I didn’t see it, but I’m familiar with the historical events,” she said.

“The story interested me after I saw the movie, so I got some books about the battle and the Spartan army. Every so often I have these dreams…” 123

He trailed off, the flush dark in his cheeks, his eyes simmering. Lacey made the connection between his intense, visceral behavior as he came out of sleep and the gendered consequences of war. “About victorious warriors and captive slave girls?”

“Exactly.” His roughened fingers continuing to caress her inner wrists, every so often sliding under the cuffs of her sleeves. Given the conversation she had the feeling that, if the table weren’t between them, he’d have his hand at the top of her stockings by now.

“Fascinating,” she said. The clatter of silverware against china and the low murmur of conversation faded into the background as she constructed her own mental image of the dim interior of a white tent, a dark-haired combatant clad in tunic and gauntlets, inspecting a girl waiting on bed of blankets. “What did she look like? Was she blonde and young and beautiful?”

“She was you,” he said. “Red hair, brown eyes, calm under pressure. Named Laetitia.”

“Me?” She gave a startled laugh. He dreamed about her?

“You.”

“Fascinating,” she said again, unable to hide the huskiness that crept into her voice.

The candle between them guttered and a faint gritty scent evocative of a campfire rose into the air. “What else? What did we do?”

“For a captured slave girl, you were no pushover. You bargained with me before I could have my way with you.”

Reality returned and she laughed, but the heavy-lidded look in his eyes made her cross her legs and squeeze her thighs together. “That sounds like me. What did I ask for?”

“You wouldn’t tell me. You said you’d make a request later.”

“And you accepted that?” she asked with a teasing smile.

“Beautiful, you were naked, restrained and willing if I agreed. It seemed like a good idea.”

“For future reference, it’s not a good idea to negotiate without knowing the details.”

“I didn’t have to agree to your request, just give you permission to ask. I got the better end of that bargain,” he said with a wicked smile. “What about you?”

“I never negotiate without knowing all terms of a deal,” she said.

“Sassy tonight,” he said, with a hot, knowing look that told her if he had his way, she’d be too limp to talk back by the end of the evening. “Answer the question.” She relented. “I don’t dream about sex.” This was true. She rarely remembered her dreams at all.

“Fine. Tell me a fantasy.”

He was back in cop-asking-questions mode, flustering her very effectively. “I don’t really…I mean, it’s not like I have many…”

“Ever masturbate?”

She inhaled sharply. “Hunter!” she gasped, glancing at the nearby tables.

“No one’s listening,” he said, his voice low and rough along her nerves. “Come on, everyone does, even cool-as-a-cucumber society babes. What do you think about?” The half-full restaurant faded into the background again. Dreams were often inexplicable mental gymnastics of a mind but his honesty about his own private thoughts creating a cocoon of safety for her to share hers. “Until recently, I had my share of conquering warrior compelling a captive into his bed fantasies,” she admitted.

“And now?”

The waitress approached with their plates in hand, saving Lacey from replying immediately. Steam rose from the white bowl containing a mound of angel hair pasta topped with a sauce positively chunky with ground sausage and beef. Hunter appreciatively eyed the platter holding his slab of lasagna while Jen placed fresh bread on the table and left.

Lacey twirled pasta around her fork, using her spoon to lift the heaping bite to her lips. “It’s as good as I remember,” she said when she finished.

He didn’t respond, but she took the enthusiasm with which he dug into the layers of pasta, meat, sauce and cheese as a good sign. For a few minutes they took the edge off. Hunter kept quiet, his big, solid presence giving her the space she needed to voice her fantasies.

“Now they’ve taken a slightly more contemporary turn,” she said finally. Why was it so hard to talk about? Perhaps because dreams arose from the unconscious, but daydreams, fantasies should be controllable and were therefore even more personal?

He wiped his mouth and focused on her. “I’m listening.” The

combination of command and invitation made it so easy to give in. “I imagine you persuading me,” she said, giving a little extra emphasis to persuading.

“Not taking no for an answer,” he said.

“Yes.”

“I can do that.”

“I thought no meant no,” she said.

“No means no until we set some ground rules about when it doesn’t.” Her pulse pounded in her throat and she recrossed her legs for the dozenth time that evening. “Why did I have to ask? Maybe I’ve misread you, but I don’t get the sense you have a problem with…what I’m asking for.”

He pinned her to the back of the booth with a look, then leaned a little closer. “Are you hot right now, Lacey? Getting wet? You’re shifting around like you’re sitting on tacks.”

Her heart stopped. Flat out stopped. She stared at him, her face flushing. He knew.

He watched and knew, but he didn’t push. She could drown in the space he gave her to just *be*.

“That’s why you have to ask. Something about it makes you hot. Watching you explore makes me hot.”

Hot was very, very good. “As long as I’m asking…can you be a modern day warrior while you’re doing it?”

Both eyebrows shot up. “You want me…”

“…to be a cop. But…disreputable.”

She hoped, *prayed*, he understood the fantasy was no reflection on his professional conduct or ethics, just her mind and her body responding to his sheer presence and of course, he had handcuffs at the ready. She held her breath anyway, ready to backpedal and smooth things over if necessary.

Instead he looked her over with a gaze just short of insolent. “You look like such a lady in that dress. Who knew?”

There didn’t seem to be anything else to say. He finished his lasagna while she picked at her pasta and drank the rest of her wine. A gentle buzz filled her head as she idly studied the charcoal sketch of the Trevi fountain on the wall. She was wet. Her lace panties tugged at her clit with each shift of her hips and all she could think about was going home. What would he do? How would she respond?

Jen brought the check, waiting while Hunter tucked his Mastercard into the clear slot at the top.

His voice was normal despite the heat in his eyes. “I’m on duty tonight so I’ll see you later.”

“You’re working tonight?” she said, unable to keep a note of disappointment out of her voice. “I though we’d…”

She stopped because he was already shaking his head, that intense, demanding look back in his eyes.

“Then when…?” she began, but he was two steps ahead of her. Spontaneous.

Fantasy. What a wicked combination. “You’ll surprise me.” The correct answer earned her a nod as Jen set the leather folder with the credit card slip back on the table. “I took four days off to help Dad finish an addition in Regal Park,” he said as he scrawled his signature. “So I’ll be around.” Apparently that was the only parameter she was going to get. “All right,” she said.

He had her coat at the ready when she stood, but when she braced herself on the table to reach for her purse at the back of the booth

she was in such a sensual haze that she planted her hand in the dish of olive oill strewn with ground pepper and bread crumbs.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” The thick linen napkin smeared rather than absorbed the oil. “I’d better wash up. Don’t wait. I know you have to go.” 126

Liberating Lacey

He helped her, draping her coat over her bent arm, making sure her purse was secure in the crook of her elbow. “See you later, beautiful. The lasagna was great,” he said, then dropped a quick, perfunctory kiss on her lips and strolled out.

She stared after him, olive oill dripping from her fingers onto the wood flooring.

That was it? All that flirtatious, sexy talk about fantasies left her hot and bothered for him and all she got was a half-hearted kiss?

More than a little peeved she stalked through the almost-empty restaurant to the bathroom. She grabbed a couple of thick paper towels from the dispenser on the counter and wiped off the rest of the oill before hanging her coat and purse on the coat rack to wash her hands properly. She inspected her dress as she lathered up, searching for any telltale oill spots. A drycleaner would be hard pressed to get oill out of this silk, but it seemed clean—

The doorknob rattled.

“Just a minute,” she called, reaching for additional paper towels.

A pause, then a more purposeful rattle, a click and then the handle turned. Hunter slipped into the tiny room, pocketing a credit card as he closed and locked the door behind him.

“Nice trick,” she managed before he backed her into the door, braced a forearm braced on either side of her head and took her mouth with a slow, carnal authority. She ran her hands up under his sweater, caressing the hard muscle and bone of his ribs through his shirt before pulling him firmly against her.

“I’m glad you came back,” she whispered when he slid his lips over the sensitive corner of her mouth, along her cheekbone.

He answered indirectly, his words little more than hot pressure against her ear.

“Show me.”

She didn’t understand until he took her hand from his waist and placed it on her own thigh. Working their fingers in tandem they began to inch up the hem of her dress.

“Look,” he said, nudging her head to the side. A full-length mirror framed them from the toes of her cream heels to the top of his dark brown head, his face half-hidden in the auburn waves of her hair as he leaned into her.

The contrast between her hand, some spots still damp from her half-finished drying, and his darker, bigger one, made her breath catch in her throat. At his urging she pulled up her skirt. His breath hitched, then eased out slowly when the hem cleared the lacy tops of her stockings and crept higher, revealing several inches of pale thigh before creamy lace came into view. She stopped when the hem was just above the elastic edge of her panties.

He took her other hand and slid it over the rucked-up fabric. “Show me how happy you are to see me,” he whispered as he guided her pink-tipped fingers under the lace.

The trimmed curls covering her mound gave way to a familiar wet heat. Lace rasped against the back of her hand as she slid her fingers into her swollen folds, letting 127

out a little moan as her index finger brushed her clit, taut and slick. The long muscles in her thighs trembled at the contact.

But she hesitated. “I don’t think I could…here…” She meant masturbate. If Hunter began stroking her clit, sank a finger into her wet channel, she’d shatter like a cold china dish dropped in hot

water. But to do it herself called for an audacity she didn't think she had.

Through the scant protection of her panties Hunter covered her hand with his, urging her to begin a slow rhythm. "Think about what we're gonna do the next time I see you. Show me how good it makes you feel."

A tsunami of desire swamped her. His big body pressed hard against hers, one arm braced on the door over her head, the other hand dark over her mound, the thumb pressing into her abdomen, the fingers resting lightly on her own as they moved. Her hand obediently held up her skirt while the other stroked delicately in her panties.

Illuminated by the soft light over the vanity her image in the mirror was a column of cream, from her face to her feet, the only break her flaming hair, her flushed cheeks and lips and the carnal vision of Hunter's tanned hand possessively casual against her mound as she pleasured herself for him.

There wasn't time for a slow, sensual build, so she used her index and middle fingers and press-rubbed either side of her clit, her body trembling in time to the spasms contracting her inner muscles.

"Nice, beautiful," Hunter rasped in her ear, his hand still lightly resting on hers. "I didn't know you liked that touch. I'll keep that in mind." Lacey's head dropped back against the door as a desperate little sob skipped from her throat. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the red-hot scene and she was getting close. Lips parted to sip at the close, warm air, she did as he ordered and thought about what could happen the next time he darkened her door.

She'd kneel for him. His hand would firmly grip the nape of her neck when she took him in her mouth, his fingers tightening as she flicked her tongue on the super-sensitive spot under the head of his shaft…

One arm braced next to his head, with the other hand Hunter gripped her waist, keeping her close for slow, rhythmic thrusts against her hip. The matching green of his sweater and his glassy eyes stood out even in the dim light. Their gazes met in the mirror,

sending a bolt of lust straight to her clit. She slowed her touch to keep herself at a simmer and flicked her gaze down to the erection straining the front of his pants.

“You, too,” she demanded, her voice a husky whisper in the silent bathroom.

He shook his head and looked down at her hand. “Keep going, beautiful.”

“Oh, please,” she whispered. She wanted to see him do this almost as badly as she wanted to come herself.

He stepped away to snag several tissues from the box on the counter. Still focused on the barely visible movements of her fingers, he opened his belt and zipper to release 128

his shaft, the tip gleaming wet. The sight of his big hand firmly gripping his straining length nearly sent her sliding to the floor.

A few cursory, almost caressing strokes, then he held his palm in front of her mouth.

“Lick.”

She did, then he began to pump himself in earnest, the motion made slick and easy by her saliva. He focused on the top half of his shaft, clearly intending to get off fast and rough, nothing gentle or tentative about it. His focused intensity sent another shockwave of pleasure through her abdomen.

“Oh, God,” she said, the words light and barely audible in the still air. Sweat broke out at the base of her spine and along her hairline. Her skin felt too tight as her clit swelled and strained between her rapidly stroking fingers. Her gaze skittered between her hand and his, just inches apart, moving in heated synchronicity.

The pleasure built, built, *built*, until she fisted her hand in the folds of her uplifted skirt, arched her back and flew off into space. One

soft cry escaped her lips before Hunter crushed her mouth under his.

He growled low in his throat. As the final tremors ebbed she broke the kiss to look in the mirror, her gaze zipping between the last, rough strokes over his swollen shaft and the tense agony etched into his face.

With a hard grunt he clapped the tissues to the head of his shaft and gritted his teeth, his hips jerking in release. Each shuddering pulse reverberated through her body, the musky scent of his semen mixing with sweat and the heat they created together. A groan eased from his throat as he subsided, nuzzling into her hair.

He recovered first, unselfconsciously cleaning up while she leaned against the door and tried to stiffen her knees. After he washed his hands he turned to face her, the only sign of their interlude the flush receding from his tanned cheekbones.

How did he do that, look as if nothing had happened when she felt like a boneless, skinless chicken breast? “Another first for me,” she said.

He lifted the limp hand that had been in her panties and brought her fingers to his mouth. A stuttering breath eased from her throat at the hot, wet contact of his tongue licking her juices from the tips of her index and middle fingers, “You’ve got another one coming soon,” he said, the rich promise in his voice laced with the mildest of threats.

Renewed heat prickled under her arms and at the small of her back, because the look in his eyes could have set fire to steel. With self-assured, gentle hands he straightened her panties on her hips, then shimmied her skirt back down to her knees.

He handled her like he had a right to. She let him. In the softly lit bathroom the act of restoring her clothes to their proper place was sexier, more intimate than taking them off, reminding her of what she wouldn’t have, couldn’t have until he appeared on her doorstep in the guise of a rogue cop.

For now, her lover stood in front of her, his hand cupping her nape under the disheveled layers of her hair to hold her still for another kiss, the thorough kind, with tongue and a rather punishing nip to her lower lip.

“See you later, beautiful,” he said again and let himself out of the bathroom.

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Chapter Fourteen

Hunter pulled himself over the tailgate into the bed of his father's two-ton dualie pickup truck, muttering to himself as he reconciled the truck bed's contents to the lumberyard's invoice from memory. They were on schedule to finish the job by the end of the week and needed grout and tile for the backsplash and hardware for the cabinets.

"That's all of it, Dad."

His father scrawled his signature on the paperwork, handed the clipboard back to the employee and walked around the driver's side of the truck. Hunter leaped over the truck bed and got into the passenger's side.

"Must be nice to have so much energy," his dad commented as he started the engine.

Hunter gave his father a sidelong glance. "You keep up pretty well most days," he said.

His father shook his head. "Not lately. Must be getting old."

"You're not even fifty," Hunter scoffed.

With a shrug his dad turned out of the parking lot and pulled into traffic. "Close enough. You've been in a good mood lately. Things going good with Lacey Meyers?" Hunter looked out the window. "Yeah," he said, flashing back to the irresistible memory of watching her get off in the restaurant bathroom. Jesus, was there anything she wouldn't do when she was with him? The sex was getting fucking confusing. No condoms. Shared fantasies, something that he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt she'd told no one else.

Jesus *Christ*.

A woman that strong, that capable, that powerful trusted him

enough to put herself at his mercy. Sure, every time he took someone into custody they were under his control. Sure, handcuffs of the carbon steel, leather cuff or pink fuzzy variety were practically standard issue in girls' nightstands, along with vibrators, flavored or glowin-the-dark condoms, massage oil, lube and a bunch of other kinky stuff he could take or leave, but this wasn't the typical badge bunny "Let's play traffic stop" bullshit other girls had asked for. This was different. This was personal. Intimate.

This was him in Lacey's head and her in his head. This was a woman he cared about far more than he wanted to admit.

"You're protecting yourself, right?"

Hunter snapped back to the strip malls and fast food restaurants moving past at forty-five miles an hour and stared open-mouthed at his dad, who'd apparently learned how to read minds since Hunter last saw him. "*What?* " 131

His dad coughed and focused on traffic. "I'm asking if you're practicing safe sex." Half-relieved, half-dismayed, Hunter closed his eyes. Oh. *That* kind of self-protection. Should he ask his dad to define safe sex? Was it safe to fuck in the parking lot, in the back seat of his car, in a restaurant bathroom, in Memorial Park in the rain?

Was it safe to fuck without condoms? Was it safe to turn loose his darkest alter ego and fulfill her most secret fantasy? He went for the obvious. "Jesus, Dad. I got this speech when I turned fifteen. I don't need a refresher." Like the suspect who protested louder and louder that there were no drugs in his car, no sir, look all you want, officer, well gee I don't know how that cocaine got in my console, Hunter blustered defensively because the question—either one—hit too close to home.

"Sorry. None of my business. It's just…you know," his dad said, then clamped his jaw shut and rubbed the back of his neck.

Hunter did know. Sex had consequences, undeniable emotional and physical consequences. Acting like it meant nothing didn't change the fact that it did and while he never, ever snapped at his father like he just had, well, his father never, ever dug that deep into his personal life.

No Dad, I'm not practicing safe sex. Safe means I use a condom every single time. Safe means yeah, I don't fuck around on a girl but she knows it's not going anywhere. You want to know why they break up with me? Because any guy, even a greasy craps dealer and a workaholic neurosurgery resident, is a better bet for a happily ever after than me. And Lacey deserves a happily ever after.

But Lacey also said she wasn't looking for Mr. Right. Hell, she didn't say a word about wanting more, and why would she? She was the most independent, self-sufficient, contained woman he'd ever met. She liked him, she respected him, she loved him in the sack but she sure-as-shit didn't need him so hallelujah, he was off the hook there. As long as he kept the firsts coming he was living up to his end of the bargain.

That wasn't true either. The truth was he felt like he had something beautiful and fragile cupped in his palm, something that would shatter beyond repair if he dropped it. Hunter looked at his hands, resting loosely on his thighs. They were in pretty good shape this week but the more typical assortment of scrapes, bruises, and cuts told the truth of who he was and what he did. His hands wielded a nail gun, a hammer, a saw, a

.9 millimeter. They lifted, restrained, contained, controlled. They didn't handle beautiful, delicate things. Not well, anyway.

He wasn't protecting himself, not like he could, not like he should, but it didn't matter. He knew this would end. It was just a question of whether she'd trade up or he'd decide he couldn't get any deeper with her.

But it wasn't ending tonight.

Tonight he had a sassy, sexy redhead to interrogate.

* * * * *

132

Liberating Lacey

Sheets of cold fall rain lashed from the night sky, giving Lacey all the incentive she needed to dash up the two steps into the mudroom with her laptop bag and purse swinging wildly against her leg. She dumped the bags on the washing machine and rubbed her fingers against her scalp. The rain had dampened her hair on the short sprint from her car and already it began to break free of the blow-dried straightening into its natural waves. Shrugging out of her trench coat as she kicked off her shoes, she hung the coat to dry on one of the hooks by the door and padded in her stockinged feet through the house to the front door to retrieve the mail from the box by the door.

In the kitchen she poured herself a glass of white wine and began to sort through the mail, idly rubbing the top of her foot against her calf as she sipped and opened envelopes. Today was Day Three in Hunter's vacation. He'd come to her tonight, or tomorrow night, in the house her grandfather built as a wedding present for her grandmother, the house her father was raised in. Lacey's earliest memories were in this house, playing in the kitchen, helping her grandmother in the garden, having a picnic in the backyard as the sun danced in the leaves of the giant oaks. Every room held dozens of memories for her and images of Hunter, in her bed, her shower, asleep in the living room, waiting for her on the front porch, were beginning to overlay those of Davis.

But Hunter had touched down so lightly in her life, like a wild bird of prey, talons outstretched just above a branch, wings beating against the air. Despite the accumulation of memories, he left no permanent imprint other than a toothbrush in the bathroom. That was it. No clothes, no magazines, books, DVDs, certainly no pictures or other personal effects. Erasing his physical reminders from the house would take five seconds. She'd opened the doors, tried to make him welcome and yet he hovered, poised to fly in an instant.

Best not to think about what that meant on an emotional level, because as Claire so frequently and rightly reminded her, this was casual. But it was three months of casual.

But they were no longer using condoms. But he told her the most heart-wrenching story of child abandonment she'd ever heard, letting her into a side of him he hadn't yet shared. Her brain compulsively worried over the dichotomy, the lack of a tangible presence in her life and the clear emotional connection she felt growing between them.

She felt. Not he felt. Keep some defenses up, Lacey.

The wine trickled through her veins, heightening her anticipation. She looked at the clock, creeping closer to seven, and listened to the sounds of a dreary fall night. The rain hadn't lessened, rather settled into a steady pattering against the windows. Cars drove by on the street outside, the tires splashing through puddles before fading into the distance.

The mail included several invitations to upcoming holiday events, addressed to Ms.

Meyers and guest. Carrying the glass of wine she went back to the mudroom and retrieved her BlackBerry, intending to add the parties to her calendar. She'd deal with the guest part later.

Three hard thumps rattled her sturdy front door in the frame, startling her on her way back to the kitchen and sending her heart rate soaring. The wine swayed in the 133

glass before she very carefully set both the glass and the BlackBerry down on the table behind the sofa. The moment of truth was here. Fantasy was about to become reality.

The fist took up pounding on her door again, five…ten…fifteen steady, insolent beats adding a layer of annoyance to the rising heat in her blood. Dressed in her work suit, her hair wavy and tousled around her face, her feet clad only in silk stockings, she hauled the

door open.

“What on earth?” she began as she opened the door, then the words guttered in her throat.

Hunter stood in front of her, his face blank and unreadable. Drops of rain, glittering in the porch light, clung to his cropped brown hair and open hip-length black leather jacket. He wore jeans, motorcycle boots and his badge and gun on his belt. A black t-shirt clinging to his muscular chest and abdomen matched the three days worth of stubble on his jaw and the dark threat in his eyes. For all intents and purposes he looked much as he had the first night she brought him home, except never in a million years would she have taken a chance on such a hard-edged man.

Of all the incarnations of Hunter she’d seen waiting on her front porch, this was the first to send a frisson of fear through her veins. But it *was* Hunter and to fulfill her fantasy, he’d brought his best game, playing the part of the man he wasn’t—a dishonorable cop who’d use his power to take advantage of someone smaller, weaker, virtually defenseless. In that instant she decided she’d be everything she *wasn’t*, an uppity, rich, connected divorcee, convinced she was, like Vince Jameson, above the law.

“Ms. Meyers?” His gaze flickered over her, not the caressing look of a lover but rather the eyes of a cop, ticking off details. Something about her appearance must have made her look like an easy mark, because as she watched his demeanor went from dangerous but professional to just plain dangerous.

“Yes,” she said, using her most disdainful voice, the one she saved for uncooperative lenders dragging their feet on due diligence.

“Officer Anderson with the police department. A waitress at Caffe Grazie claims you had sex in their bathroom.”

She had, *fabulous* sex, but it was far too early to confess. “What of it?” she said, not denying it, striving for bored, elitist as she shifted her weight to one hip. “Did she see anything?”

“No,” he said, “but she says she saw an unidentified man follow you

into the bathroom. Then she heard noises characteristic of a sexual encounter. Specifically, she heard you begging for more."

Her response was automatic. "It certainly wasn't me," she said, still snippy, letting her eyes roam over him as insolently as he'd examined her. "I never beg. Sorry you had to come out on such a nasty night."

Let him figure out how to deal with that, she thought as she stepped back to close the door, but he wedged his booted foot between the door and the frame, preventing it 134

from latching shut. Inexorably he pushed the door open, then he was in her foyer, all six feet, two hundred and twenty heavily muscled pounds of him.

Without taking his eyes off her he closed the door and locked it, the click of the bolt shooting home echoing through the living room. She spun and scrambled for the kitchen, cursing her unwitting decision to remove her shoes as her feet slipped on the hardwood, then the slate. A muffled thud told her his jacket was now on the floor of her tiled entryway. She put the big island between herself and the kitchen door, the mail scattered over the granite surface, and tried not to think about how he'd spread her out like an offering on this very same island the first night they met.

A wry, twisted grin she'd never seen before spread across his face as he followed her into the room. For a brief moment she considered sprinting through the back door, but bad-ass cop or not, she wasn't sacrificing a pair of silk stockings to the rough, wet wood of her deck. Worse was the thought of making Hunter take her down in the middle of her backyard. Try explaining *that* to the neighbors.

So the back door was out. His grin widened, as if he could read her mind and found her thought process entertaining. He braced himself between the door to the living room and the French doors to the sun porch at the other end of the kitchen. In the back of her mind she noticed he was using his body in a way she'd never seen

before. A weapon. At this point it was a strategic, defensive weapon, but she harbored no illusions he wouldn't go on the offense eventually.

"My husband's working upstairs," she bluffed, getting into the role.

"Where's the bling?" Blunt and terse, he nodded at her ringless left hand clutching the edge of the island.

"I know people in the department," she said, trying a different tack.

He shot her a wicked, insulting look, his eyes lingering on her mouth. "Right now your exhibitionist tendencies are just between you and me. You want to take that public?"

Definitely not. Maybe she could negotiate her way through this. "What do you want?"

"What do you think might convince me to forget this ever happened?" And there it was, her fantasy, the soft-spoken question contrasting dizzily with the hard, unrelenting look on his face. Slow, sticky desire pulsed in her breasts, her belly, her inner thighs as she considered her options. Wasn't there a usual price to pay in these situations?

After unclamping her fingers from the granite countertop she took a shallow, skittering breath and walked toward him. He stood his ground, made her come all the way to him, and she did, feeling even more petite than usual as her bare toes met his biker boots. When she was close enough to feel the heat radiating from him, she lifted both hands to the hard planes of his chest, caressing hard muscle over heavy bone before sliding her palms down his abdomen. His breathing quickened, his flat belly 135

rising and falling more rapidly when she unbuckled his belt and opened his button and zipper.

Then she locked her eyes with his, looking up at him as she went down, kneeling before him on the unforgiving slate floor in her

kitchen.

Her considerate lover would have suggested they move things to the living room or the sun porch, in deference to her knees. Officer Anderson, however, simply unclipped his gun from his belt and set it on her kitchen table, then shifted his hips to facilitate her pulling his jeans down and releasing his shaft.

She'd had plenty of practice since her first lesson in the sun porch three months ago and she put every single trick she'd learned to very good use. She licked his straining length to make it slick, then took him all the way to the back of her throat in one long, swallowing move. As she reversed she wrapped one hand around the base and cupped his testicles with the other. Up and down, up and down, working his length with her hand and mouth, each action steeped in the confidence she knew how to please him.

His breath hissed between his teeth. "Fuck, yeah," he murmured.

Her eyes had drifted shut, so she opened them and peered up at him, pausing at the very tip of his shaft to tease him with a flickering lick. His implacable gaze a sharp contrast to his ragged breathing, he laced his fingers into her hair and took control of the pace. Desire arced through her body, ratcheting up with each stifled grunt, the tense and release of his strong fingers against her head. Every muscle in his body stiffened, his shaft swelling on her tongue, then a mere second later he jerked and let out a guttural groan, his semen pulsing onto her tongue.

When he was well and truly done, when the tension slackened from his limbs and he combed his fingers out through her hair, she let him slip from her mouth. She sat back on her heels and idly tousled her hair as he buttoned up. The scene had played out exactly as she'd anticipated, but under her satisfaction ran a vein of disappointment at the quick end.

Alarm bells went off when he didn't reach down to help her to her feet. Instead he crossed his arms over his chest and offered her an amused, condescending half-smile.

"Very nice, Ms. Meyers. But that's not what I had in mind."

* * * * *

When he said a blowjob wasn't what he wanted, Lacey's expression was so pricelessly shocked Hunter almost laughed out loud. Was that all she'd fantasized about, a quick release for him, nothing for her?

To his relief her open-mouthed astonishment quickly disappeared behind the snooty, arrogant look so suited to her role. She didn't question his statement, just followed his lead, rising smoothly to her feet and cocking an eyebrow at him, as if she was the one with all the power, as if her lips weren't wet and swollen from sucking his cock.

"That's too bad, because it's all you're getting." She was backing away as she said it, putting the kitchen table between them, then she turned and bolted for the French doors leading to the west end of sun porch.

Reacting automatically, Hunter shouldered through the door to the living room and paused in front of the matching doors at the sun porch's east end. Through the glass he could see the wicker furniture clustered around a games table, but no Lacey. Keeping an eye on both the door to the kitchen and a third of the sun porch, he paused and listened.

A faint rustling noise reached his ears over his shallow breathing and the patter of rain. The brush of a lining against skirt fabric or silk stockings, he decided. She was close. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the door to the kitchen swing open less than an inch, then heard the thud of Lacey's feet heading back toward the sun porch.

Acting on instinct, he strode back to the door to the kitchen, then ducked and twisted as the door swung hard against his shoulder. At her muffled exclamation he pushed the door open and grabbed for

her.

He got a fistful of cinnamon hair. Lacey yelped as she came up short, both hands reaching back to her scalp. He eased up on his grip when he got an arm around her waist, pulling her back against his body, but he didn't let go. A quick, possessive massage of her scalp seemed to calm her; she took a slow, purposeful breath and stood, trembling in his arms.

"Nice try, honey, but we've just scratched the surface of what I'm getting." That ended any show of submission. She shoved at the forearm clamped hard around her waist and at the same time elbowed him in the ribs. Amused by her struggles he tightened his grip and lifted her off her feet, carrying her up the stairs and into her bedroom. The door slammed closed with a kick of his booted foot. He set her down none too gently then clicked on the lamp on the end table and sprawled back on the chaise, legs crossed at the ankle.

"Strip," he said, linking his fingers behind his head to watch the show.

"Excuse me?" She stood less than a foot in front of him, defenseless as hell in her tight skirt and no shoes.

"I'm going to get real bad-tempered if I have to repeat myself," he said in a softer version of the voice that got criminals out of a car and down on the ground. "Your clothes. Take them off."

She turned for the door.

"I have to chase you down again, you're getting fucked where I catch you." Color was high on her cheekbones when she turned back to face him. A slightly off-balance look mixed with the heat in her eyes, the same thing he'd seen in the restaurant when she asked him why she had to clearly state what she wanted. It turned her on. He couldn't give her much she didn't have, but he could give her this, the space to explore how it felt to turn control over to someone else.

Her fingers on the buttons running up the front of her dark brown jacket ended any thoughts about the emotions behind what they were doing. She undid them, one by one. The fabric slipped silkily against her blouse as she slid the coat off and tossed it at him. He caught it and held it to his chest, the faint scent of Lacey's perfume and skin rising from the warm jacket.

When she started on the blouse, he spoke again. "The skirt first." If today was like any other day, she'd be wearing thigh-high silk stockings and a pretty pair of panties. He wanted a couple of teasing glimpses of sexy lingerie peeking out from under the hem of her blouse.

A dark pink stained her cheeks, but he knew the difference between Lacey's aroused flushes and embarrassed blushes so he didn't back off. She'd asked for a bad-ass cop. She'd get him as controlling, unmanageable and demanding as he could stand to be with her.

The blouse tightened across her breasts when she ducked her head and reached behind her for the button and zipper of her skirt. He didn't worry about not being able to see her hands, just waited for her to shimmy the skirt down and step out of it.

The hem of the butterscotch blouse skimmed her hipbones when she straightened.

Her stockings were nude, as usual, with white lace at the top. His heart rate went into double time when he realized the panties were the pale pink of cotton candy. He loved the sweet, virginal shades of her underwear, the delicate lace so seductive it didn't need bold colors or strategic cutouts to drive him wild. The sets must have been expensive because the label was in French, but she let him rip it off her like she bought them by the six-pack at Wal-Mart.

Her hands on her hips, a faint smile teased the corners of her mouth as she caught him staring at her like an idiot. "Like what you see?" Ignoring the echoes of his own arrogant question at Buff the night they met, he took his time, treating himself to a long, slow,

assessing look at the length of her legs, topped by the demure, secretive underwear. “So far,” he said, trying to sound bored when every inch of revealed skin sent blood thumping through his body. “The blouse. Slowly.

Start at the bottom.”

The smile disappeared. In repayment she took care to tease him with the blouse, parting the slowly opening edges to give him a glimpse of her bellybutton, her breastbone, then the edge of her bra. Sneaking peeks through the messy layers of her hair, she let the fabric slip from her shoulders. It caught at her elbows while she undid the buttons at her wrists, framing her body and the sexy pink underwear in soft brown before the blouse slid to the floor to land on the skirt.

Damn, double damn, she looked like sin on a stick, the lace topping her stockings, her red curls dark behind the pink lace over her mound, her breasts plumped up by the bra. Once he got his hands in her hair, kissed the fullness back into her lips, got a sexy flush going on her collarbone and neck, his prim entrepreneur would look like a pinup dream.

“You sure you didn’t have sex in that bathroom?” he asked, falling back on the convenient “offense” to justify his big, bad self on her front porch.

“I did *not*,” she snapped, imperious even in her underwear. Where did she learn that haughty tone? He’d never heard Lacey talk to anyone like that, not once in three months of dating.

“Wrong answer,” he said then surged to his feet. To her credit she didn’t back away, just put her hands on her hips and glared up at him. The snooty, confident look faded when he crooked his index finger through the front clasp of her bra and popped it open. She gasped and backed up a step, lifting her hands to stop the lace from

pulling away to reveal her nipples. Seizing the opportunity, he reached for the shoulder straps, stripping her of the bra before he twisted her arm behind her to direct her toward the bed.

“No,” she said, pushing back against him when she came up against the edge of the mattress.

“You want me to make you?” The question was rhetorical. He lifted her and followed her up on the bed. In the time it took him to get his shirt off over his head she was poised to make her escape at the opposite side of the bed.

“Don’t make things worse, Ms. Meyers,” he said as he dragged her back against him. “Face the wall. Like that. Good girl,” he praised, as if she was actually cooperating.

When she sat back on her heels facing the wall behind the brass rungs of the headboard, he urged her elbows up. As he snugged up behind her, bare chest to her back, aligning his knees outside hers, her upraised hands automatically slid behind his neck. That wasn’t where he’d normally put them for this maneuver but it would work while he played good cop for a second.

She made a questioning little noise that turned into a whimper as he cupped her breasts, thumbs brushing her nipples into hard, dusky points. When the caresses made her bite down on her lower lip and push her knees against his, widening their stance on the pale green comforter cover, he reached behind him with his right hand and palmed his cuffs. At the same time he locked the fingers of his left hand around her left wrist and brought it down behind her.

He had the steel bracelet, warm from its place at the small of his back, around her wrist before she comprehended was he was doing. When the cuff clicked into place she startled and gasped, twisting in a futile effort to look behind her. Pressing his advantage of surprise, strength and experience, he gripped her right wrist and secured it to the left.

The look she shot him over her shoulder was pure vamp, hell in her eyes as she gave the handcuffs a good yank. “That was a dirty

trick," she said. While she was still very much in character, right down to the pout, the words were a little breathless.

"Never said I'd play fair," he replied as he leaned back, blatantly admiring the erotic sight of her delicate wrists, cuffed and resting on the pink lace bikini panties. He stroked her curves from hip to ass, then ran his index fingers under the lower edge of 139

the panties. Goosebumps prickled along her arms and her nipples tightened. Still looking over her shoulder she shuddered, her eyes now heavy-lidded and aroused.

"You like?" he asked.

She turned to look straight ahead. "Not at all," she said, but he heard the desire in her voice.

"Too bad," he drawled as he nuzzled into her hair to find her sensitive ear. Using both hands as a visible, tactile reminder that she couldn't, he brushed the hair back from her ear and bit down gently on the edge. Withdrawing his hands from her hair, he smoothed both palms up from her hips, over her ribcage, to her breasts, where he pinched the nipples with just enough pressure to make her squirm and sigh.

"What do you want?" she asked, a hint of desperation in the question.

Dark currents of submission and restraint swirled around them in the still room. He kept silent, caught up in the soft weight of her breasts in his hands. Rain streamed down the window panes, the coursing streams twisting and twirling in the light from the street lamps. In front of him, confined between his knees, Lacey bent her head. He could smell the faint sweat that had broken out at her nape, the rich tang of arousal mixed with it, feel the rapid beat of her heart under the soft flesh of her breast, her nipples, hard, eager. When he slid his fingers into her panties, he knew she'd be hot and wet for him.

But for now, just for a moment he let her be, let her breathe, anchoring herself in the physical and emotional space they shared. When the starch sapped from her spine, leaving a beautiful surrender in her pose, he bent close to her ear.

“I’ll tell you what I want,” he whispered, “when you tell me what you did in that bathroom.”

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Chapter Fifteen

Hunter's words fell in a rough, tumbling growl into her ear. Lacey froze, her hands tightening into fists against his bare, ridged abdomen as her toes curled from the bolt of lust that shot through her body.

The game was shifting, changing in ways she hadn't anticipated, but this was still familiar. A negotiation, of sorts. She resisted, he pushed, but she knew she could resist until he just took her. She was at a disadvantage, but she'd never give up.

His big hands, so casually possessive now that she was under his control, plucked at her nipples, then pinched and rolled. The sharp wave of pleasure that coursed outward from the hard peaks made her head drop back. The sensations of his shoulder under her head, his hands on her body, slithered down to pool in her belly, all the more powerful for her inability to stop them.

"I didn't do anything," she said, forcing a hint of defiance in her voice.

"Really?" he asked with mock surprise, tightening the pressure on her nipples. "A hot little piece like you? You don't seem innocent to me." Indignant, she opened her mouth to respond, but he nipped her shoulder. "Ready to confess?"

"No!"

"Then stop talking, Ms. Meyers."

She almost, *almost* said, "Make me," like an unruly ten-year-old, but the indubitable certainty that Hunter would improvise a way to make her stop talking kept the words in her mouth.

A low rumble of laughter vibrated against her pinned arms. "Good decision," he said.

Then he put his hands back on her body, his breath rhythmic but shallower than normal. He bent his head and rubbed the rough stubble coating his jaw against her cheek. His eyes focused intently on his hands and the unwavering attention fascinated her. What caught his eye? The difference between her pale, protected skin and his tanned hands, or the smoothness of her flesh contrasting with his abraded knuckles and calloused fingers?

Or perhaps it was the response his hands coaxed from her body. A flush moved up her breasts as they swelled in response to his touch and electricity coursed from her nipples through her belly to her clit. Her pulse pounded in all the places she wanted him to touch. Her lips and the skin of her inner thighs, both desperate for his kiss. Her clit, plump and wet for his fingers. But he avoided those places, coming close but never 141

touching. As captive as the woman in his dream, she knelt on delicate silk of her duvet cover and fought his efforts to slowly, methodically, drive her out of her mind.

“You look so sexy wearing my cuffs,” he growled.

Oh, God. If he started talking, she was done for. At his words sensation ricocheted from her throbbing nipples to her poor, neglected clit. Sweat prickled behind her knees, at the base of her spine as she twisted in his grip.

“I’m gonna leave them on when I fuck you. Feel how hard I am? That’s from thinking about every stroke, so hot and wet.”

With a high-pitched whimper Lacey’s head dropped forward, but instead of the relief she sought, she found more torture. Hunter gave a low chuckle and put his devious mouth to work on her sensitive neck. Alternating licks and bites with gentle sucks, he made his way down her cervical spine and over the soft skin of her shoulder.

“I’m gonna spread you wide under me and watch you take it all,

over and over…right here." He left off teasing one nipple, gliding his hand down into her panties. His fingers slid past her clit to circle her sensitive opening and suddenly all she could think about was how good he felt when he pushed inside.

The need to touch him overwhelmed her. She reached for him, stopped short by the cuffs biting into her wrists, ruthlessly halting her movements.

"Oh yeah, *I* like," he said. "No distractions, nothing keeping me from doing this…" His rough finger circled her clit, slick and swollen at the top of her wet folds.

"Yes, oh yes," she sighed in relief, arching into his touch.

"No, oh no," he replied, amused dominance in his voice. He lightened his touch and widened the circular motion. The rising tension slackened, but he kept her on a simmer and added his other hand to the mix, pushing first one, then a second finger inside her.

Now released from his taunting grasp her breasts seemed to swell and throb in the dark air of her bedroom. Again, she jerked against the restraining cuffs, desperate to cup them and soothe the nipples, or bat his taunting hand away and rub her clit.

"So fucking sexy, watching you like this," he murmured as she writhed in his arms.

"The poor guy probably didn't know what hit him. Those pink panties look so sweet, but you're hot enough to burn the fucking house down." She growled, actually *growled* with frustration, and ground down on his hands. He laughed again and pulled his fingers from her panties to trace her lower lip with the tip of his middle finger, then watch as her tongue flickered out to taste her own arousal.

"See how hot you are, honey?" he said, the fingers teasing her clit maintaining the same steady, torturously unsatisfying pace. "Come on, just tell me. Then we can move on to paying your debt to society."

Oh, *God!*

“I won’t,” she said. Her resistance was waning, but she could feel his need growing as well. Sweat slicked their skin where they touched and his breathing, while controlled, had taken on a harsher edge. Maybe he would break first…

“Fine by me,” he said. “I’ll just bend you over right here. You think I won’t fuck you long and slow and deep and leave you hanging?” Her mind split wide open at the image of her cheek pressed into the embroidered flowers on her silk duvet cover, her hands immobilized at the small of her back while he held her hips and satisfied himself. “You wouldn’t!” She should have known better than to challenge him. Without a word he withdrew his hands and sat back and suddenly Lacey discovered something worse than enduring Hunter’s sensual torture—enduring it with no relief.

Twisting to look over her shoulder, her gaze met his, hard and unyielding. A popping sound made her eyes zip down to his hands, working at his fly. With deliberate slowness he tugged the remaining buttons free from their holes, his shaft straining through the front of his opened jeans. He put one big palm flat between her shoulder blades and began to push her forward.

She loved to win, flat-out loved it, that competitive spirit driving her ongoing reluctance to admit she begged, that she needed him more than he needed her. It was time to change her tactics. Give a little, gain a lot.

“Wait!” she cried.

His touch lightened immediately, but remained, barely grazing her skin, a vivid reminder of his intentions.

Flushed and trembling with desire, she prepared to give him what he wanted.

“Fine. I’ll tell you everything.”

* * * * *

The words were sullen and unwilling, the surrender of a militant who planned to wreak havoc on her captor or escape at the first chance. But if she’d thought her surrender would make him lessen his relentless assault on her senses, she was wrong.

“I don’t like your tone or your attitude, Ms. Meyers,” Hunter said as he pushed her down flat and straddled her backside. The cuffs made a metallic clink as he manipulated them, then her wrists separated. “Turn over.” Now! She brought her hands under her shoulders and pushed up, past wasting energy on words. It was no use. Poised above her, he flipped her with ease, the muscles in his bare torso flexing in the light from the lamp by the chaise. He brought her hands, one still locked in the cuffs, over her head, looped the free cuff behind a spindle in her brass headboard, then secured her other wrist. Wearing only her stockings and 143

drenched panties, she brought up one leg, then the other, undulating as she tried to get free.

“No, oh no,” she moaned.

He pushed her legs flat and together then straddled her, the muscles in his arms shifting under the skin as he surveyed her defenseless body. Her heart rose into her throat at the taut anticipation and stark desire etched in the hard planes of his face.

“Start talking,” he said, his gaze roaming her breasts, the swell of her hips, the wet heat between her legs.

She glanced up at her restrained hands. “Suddenly I have nothing to say,” she said, but even to her own ears, her tone had lost its edge.

He kissed her. Hard. Stopped the words in her mouth with the

pressure of his lips and the sweep of his tongue.

“This works better. It’s easier to shut you up if I don’t like what I hear.” She stared at him. His eyes, dark, clear green, were intense, but in complete control.

He bore most of his weight on his knees and forearms, but still lay close enough to her for her to feel the hard, slow hammer-beat of his heart against her ribs, his pulse reverberating through hot damp skin stretched over muscle and bone.

He bent to the sensitive spot just below her ear, following a hard nip with a gentle lick. “Tell me what happened,” he said, the words wafting against her skin.

Her eyes slid shut as seductive sensation rippled along her tightly wound nerves, but she shook her head.

Silence from him. That scared her more than his commanding words.

When she felt him use his denim-clad knees to spread her legs wide, her eyes flew open. A quick twist of his big hands and her panties dropped useless to the bed. He braced one hand flat beside her head, gripped his shaft with the other and guided it toward her aching cleft. “Time’s up.”

Outmaneuvered, outmatched, outplayed, her surrender was reluctant but real. “I swear I didn’t know he was going to follow me in!” He sat back on his heels but scooted forward, draping her thighs wide and high over his as he planted a hand on either side of her head, then bent at the elbows to kiss her. This time she felt the reward in his mouth as he leisurely flicked his tongue over the roof of her mouth, then traced the edge of both her lips.

The thick stubble on his jaw rasped against her cheek as he murmured, “He seduced you? I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true! He picked the lock on the door and came in after me.” The words trailed off into a whisper as he pushed back on his hands and bent to tongue each throbbing nipple. The wet caress provided

a form of relief before he said,

“You could have said no.”

“He was so persuasive and I…I wanted to do it,” she confessed, tugging on the handcuffs as she arched her back to thrust her nipples toward his teasing mouth.

“Bad girl,” he said before catching each bud between his teeth. She whimpered at the sharp caress. “And then?”

“He wanted me to…touch myself for him.” Why was it so hard to say? They’d both been there, both participated, but she’d held out for so long that speaking the words cost her more than she’d thought.

Voicing them into the still, hot air of her bedroom also made her insanely hot.

“Here?” He laid his big palm on her throat.

She groaned at his deviousness. “Lower!”

“Here?” Now his hand was at her breast, squeezing and pinching.

“No! Lower!”

The weight and heat of his palm drifted lower and lower, until he cupped her mound. “You must mean here.”

“Yes, but lower, lower…”

Then he slid the pad of his index and middle fingers on either side of her clit, stroking her swollen, desperate bud exactly as she had in the bathroom. “Here?” he asked, his voice all innocent inquiry.

If she’d had her hands free she would have smacked him for his choir boy tone.

“Yes, yes, there!”

She felt sure he’d stop or continue to tease her without mercy, but the perfect pace of his fingers never slowed and the pressure never lessened. Desperate and now completely without modesty or shame she spread her legs for him, gave him full access to her body. For a brief moment she opened her eyes but the sight of him looming over her, his stark gaze roaming over her quivering body and reddened nipples made them fly shut again.

“Did you come?”

“Yes,” she moaned. *And I’m going to again, so please, please don’t stop…*

“Did you like it?”

“Yes! God, yes!” *I need this so badly…*

“Do you want to come now?”

If she’d had breath to laugh, she would have, but all the air was trapped in her lungs as she poised on the edge of the abyss. “Yes! Please, oh please, don’t stop, please, please don’t—“

He didn’t stop. The slick strokes of his fingers sent her over the edge, fierce bursts of heat and light pulsing through her body. Stars burst behind her eyes while shudders rippled to her fingers and toes.

When she opened her eyes, too satiated to be embarrassed, he was still above her, restraint carved in the hard planes of his face.

“I thought you didn’t beg.”

Her response had nothing to do with the scene and everything to do with them. “I do for you,” she whispered.

A wry, almost Hunter-like smile, then he said, “Good. Keep saying that magic word and I’ll call your debt paid.”

He set about making her surrender complete, licking down the midline of her body, dipping into her navel before settling between her legs and curving one arm around to spread her folds from the top to blow gently on her throbbing clit. Still in the grips of a fierce need, she arched her back, pleading mutely with him. But he made her wait as he licked the delicate inner folds, dipped his tongue inside her, applied a gentle pressure with his rough chin.

When he pushed two fingers inside her and crooked them against the bundle of swollen, sensitive nerves, she let out a gasp and rocked her hips toward him. When he sucked her clit her back bowed off the bed. The cuffs thwarted her instinctive attempts to wrap her fingers around his powerful biceps and press against his talented, knowing mouth.

The climax built in strength and power until she was undulating on the bed, praise and pleading gasps floating into the hot, still air of her bedroom. “Oh so good…please don’t stop…oh yes, like that… just like that…please… *please*…” Then she couldn’t talk. The relentless, agonizing build stole her ability to form words and the orgasm blew away her capacity for thought. When she subsided to trembling and gasping, she opened her eyes to find him back on his heels between her legs, his chest damp with sweat as he shoved his jeans down just enough to free his shaft. He braced one forearm beside her upraised arms and gripped her hip with the other hand, positioning the broad tip at her slick opening. She gasped as he pushed forward, thick and hard and stretching her swollen, sensitive channel.

“Wait!” she gasped.

“Not a chance in hell,” he said, the raw edge in his voice proof his control was gone.

She squirmed under him, riding the painful edge of pleasure, but he just gripped her hip to hold her still. Soft, faded denim slid against her inner thighs and stockings as he thrust forward until he was as far inside her as he could get.

Hard. He was so hard inside her, his rigid abdomen pressed against her soft belly.

While one elbow bore some of his weight, his muscular chest and shoulders flattened her into the mattress.

“Say it,” he demanded, flat, unrelenting tone of his voice contrasting sharply with the slight quiver in his fingers as he brushed her hair back from her face.

She searched his face, finding her implacable rogue cop in strained line of his jaw, but a touch of softness in the depths of his green eyes. “Please,” she said. Different words trembled on the tip of her tongue, but they weren’t what he wanted to hear.

He shuddered hard, once, then began and oh, she liked this, the way he single-mindedly sought satisfaction in her tight, wet heat. A maddening friction built with every thrust, until she could think of nothing else, focus on nothing but all-consuming, 146

fierce pleasure coalescing between her legs. Arching under his heavy weight, she fought to keep her eyes open, watching his agony build with each thrust. A shudder. Air sucked in through his teeth. A quick clamp of his jaw. Always, always, he kept his eyes open and locked with hers, the clench of his teeth and tightness of his jaw vivid evidence of his own need.

When his rhythm began to falter his eyes slid closed for a moment and his head fell back before he pulled it together. But it was too late for Lacey, long stretched between agony and ecstasy. Watching him as he came undone pushed her over the edge into sobbing ecstasy.

As the peaks softened she went limp, the cuffs clattering against the brass post as her arms relaxed. Eyes closed, she heard shallow, hard breaths as he fought for control and the soft groan when he lost the battle. His hard abs jumped against her belly and his grip tightened once again on her hip as he buried himself inside her for the last

time, his cock pulsing as he came.

He gave a final shudder, sweat trickling off his jaw line to fall on her collarbone, then he melted against her. The buttons of his jeans pressed painfully into her thigh, the tender flesh already abraded by the denim, but she had other things on her mind.

As the pounding in her ears receded she heard once again the patter of rain on the windows, the wind in the wet leaves. She added another moment to her list of unforgettable memories, the moment she realized she loved Hunter. Twenty-eight-year-old-chameleon-workaholic-protective-but-wary Hunter, the man she couldn't, shouldn't give her heart to.

There was nothing romantic about her realization, no moment of joyous shared epiphany, just the heat in his eyes, the slick shift of their skin everywhere they touched, their bellies moving in rhythm, the length of the breaths slowly matching while the knowledge settled into her soul. Stupidly, imprudently, against all good advice and common sense she loved him and romantic or not, this was the moment. She was quaking, flushed and sweaty, handcuffed to her own bed. She loved him.

She had no idea how he felt.

* * * * *

That was beyond intense.

Hunter knew he should lift his weight off Lacey and uncuff her, but her feel of resilient body, the fight transformed into soft, limp satisfaction, kept him sprawled on top of her as the tension drained away.

She took hitching little breaths. Long quivers ran through her muscles and her thighs trembled around his hips. Sweat glued them together, breathing in unison as their heart rates thudded and slowed. He turned his head and pressed a kiss into the corner of her mouth.

"Are you okay?" he rumbled, his voice a sandpapery rasp from the

exertion.

“Yes,” she said, but with an odd hitch to the reply.

The answer he expected, but not the typical relaxed pleasure. Startled, he pushed back and reached for the key to his cuffs to release her. When she brought her arms down she winced and put the opposite hand to each shoulder, then winced again as she pushed herself into an upright position, her back to the headboard.

“Sure you’re okay?” he said, looking over every visible inch of her body as he automatically folded the cuffs away. Damn, damn, his scruff had scraped her neck and collarbone. Dark red marks were forming around her wrists. Worse, she was *shaking* and it wasn’t just jelly-legs from really extreme sex.

What the hell?

Now wasn’t the time for a real interrogation, not with her eyes unfocused, distant.

Without quite meeting his gaze she gave him a tremulous smile. “I’m fine. Really,” she said as she massaged her shoulders. “Just… not used to that position.” Okay. He could work with that. “How’s a hot shower sound?” he asked.

“Great,” she said, her eyes distantly focused on something over his shoulder.

Maybe she needed a minute. He pushed back off the bed and shucked his jeans and boots on the way to the bathroom. She hadn’t joined him by the time he’d turned on the taps full blast and adjusted the water temperature, so he peered around the bathroom door to find her at the foot of the bed, staring at her comforter cover.

He came to stand beside her. Her white comforter showed through

the shimmery green fabric as she fingered a four-inch rip. Somewhere in all the moving around he must have put his boot right through the material.

Shit shit shit! "I'll replace it," he said. "Just tell me where you bought it and I'll get another one."

"Don't worry about it," she said absently, trailing her fingers along the rip. "It's time to get out the flannel anyway."

He'd worry about it, but not now, not after ten on a Friday night, not with her still so quiet and distant. Instead, he guided her into to the shower. He got in first and adjusted the spray so it hit the shoulder-high swirls in the mosaic wall. Looking a little baffled when he sat down on the built-in tiled bench, she stepped in behind him and closed the glass door. He pushed back against the wall, making room for her between his legs, and reached for her hand to position her in front of him. After squeezing a big dollop of conditioner into his palm, he rubbed it between his hands to spread and warm it, then began to massage her shoulders.

The water sprayed steadily against the wall to their right, but not touching them directly. A fine mist drifted over their bodies, dampening their skin, making the coconut-scented conditioner slick under his palms. He dug his fingers into her shoulders, strengthening the touch until she sagged under his hands.

"I've never used conditioner for this," she said.

"It's got several off-label uses," he said, keeping his voice casual, his movements slow and soothing. It took her a minute, then she looked over her shoulder once again and shook her head, a soft smile on her face.

That was better.

She was quiet for a while, her body slack, the tremors easing, but

he kept at his massage, shifting from her shoulders to her upper arms, then her lower back, until she melted back against him.

He wrapped his arms around her torso and held her close. “You want to tell me what you’re thinking?” he asked. Now there was a first worth recording, him asking a woman what was on her mind.

“That wasn’t what I expected,” she said after a minute.

Oh, *fuck*. His heart stuttered, knocked hard against his ribs, then stopped. He swallowed twice before saying, “Yeah? In what way?” She was quiet for so long he was on the verge of just apologizing for the whole scene, start to finish, when she spoke. “I didn’t expect it to…affect me so powerfully.

My fantasies only went as far as what happened in the kitchen,” she said.

“I figured that,” he said.

“I didn’t know what to expect when we were in the bedroom and the uncertainty just…heightened everything.”

It was a vague answer at best, but he let it go. She’d cut him slack plenty of times after sex that rocked him to the core. “Not even at Buff?” he asked before pressing a kiss into her temple.

She shook her head, lolling back against his shoulder. “Totally different. At Buff I was carried away, swept up in the moment. This time I was…it was just so much more intense.”

He waited a minute, trying to figure out what that meant, then gave up. “We don’t have to do it again,” he said.

“Oh, no,” she replied, rubbing her hands along his thighs. “I want to do it again.

Officer Anderson.”

That startled a laugh out of him. “You do?”

Lacey looked up at him, reaching behind her to cup his rough jaw

with one hand.

“Sure,” she said, as if he’d totally missed the point. Maybe he had. This sex-in-a-relationship shit was insanely complicated. “You don’t?” He reached for the plain bar of soap and lathered his hands. “Whatever you want, beautiful,” he said as he gently soaped her breasts, then slid his fingers between her thighs. She winced. One glance down over her shoulder told him keeping his jeans on might have helped him stay in control, but the tender skin between her legs was chafed and reddened. Lesson learned, for next time.

Next time. He wasn’t sure what spooked him more unprotected sex and the unanticipated consequence of feeling closer to her each time he was bare inside her, or the fact that he kept planning ahead with Lacey, as if they had a future together.

Maybe they did. Not marriage or anything, but maybe he’d bring over some clothes, stop acting like her house was a hotel. Call when he felt like it, rather than talking himself out of it if he thought it was too soon.

The heat and humidity of the shower must have rewired his circulatory system, his entire nervous system, because his heart seemed to beat to a new rhythm. It was like each pulse whispered a message, one he couldn’t quite understand. The knowledge danced just out of his reach, coming into better focus as he quit concentrating on it, but never quite within his grasp.

A huge yawn made her jaw pop, so he pushed her to her feet. “Bedtime, beautiful.” She stood dreamily under the spray while he soaped and rinsed. Drying off took no time at all, then he ushered her into bed. As they curled up together his heartbeat, slower and smoother now, seemed less like it was transmitting Morse code and more like the reliable background noise he was accustomed to.

But he couldn’t shake the feeling that something had changed.

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Chapter Sixteen

The next morning Hunter stood on Lacey's front porch, a gym bag in one hand and his key ring in the other. Identifying her key among the dozen or so on his ring wasn't difficult—it was old, scratched, with green mold in the grooves from years under a wet flowerpot. The question was, did he use it?

He hated to ring the doorbell if she was still sleeping. He'd woken up just after eight and slipped out, using the key to lock himself out. Back at his apartment he called his dad to get the day's schedule, but his dad wasn't feeling well so the work was off.

Dad pushed himself hard to finish this job in time for the homeowners to have Thanksgiving in their newly renovated kitchen. The job was a little ahead of schedule, but this was his dad's third sick day in two months and he normally called in sick as frequently as Hunter. In other words, never.

Shaking off his worries, Hunter had showered and changed into a decent shirt and clean jeans, then gathered a few things, underwear and socks, a couple of nicer shirts, a spare pair of khakis, a razor. He'd put them in the gym bag and driven through a brilliant fall morning, the kind that came only after a heavy rain, back to Lacey's house.

It's just a couple of changes of clothes, he told himself as he looked at the key. *She gave you the key. You've used it, yes, to lock yourself out, but you've used it.*

He used it again, this time to let himself into the foyer.

Lacey peered around the door at him, her brown eyes bright with curiosity. When you handed out keys like they were Halloween candy, it was anybody's guess who might walk through a door.

He stepped into the foyer and closed the door behind him. He'd caught her getting ready to leave because she wore a tight-fitting

white sweater turtleneck, jeans and black boots. Her keys and purse sat on the table by the closet. A black quilted coat hung from her hand as she looked at him, then at the bag in his hand.

“Hi,” she said, her hair falling in flaming waves against her cheekbones. “I thought you were working with your dad today.”

“Dad’s sick. We’re ahead of schedule so he’ll finish up with the regular crew on Monday.” He hefted the bag and tried to gauge her response. “I thought I’d leave some stuff here. For when I stay over.”

Her smile spread slow and sweet across her face. “Great,” she said casually as she shrugged into the coat. “I’m starving. I didn’t eat anything last night and I have no food in the house. I was about to go get some breakfast, then go grocery shopping. Boring Saturday stuff. Want to come?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Sounds good.”

He left his bag by the door and locked up behind them both. “Where to?” he said as they settled into his car.

“The Butter Knife has great eggs Benedict,” she said as she buckled her seat belt.

“What the hell are eggs Benedict? I like Gino’s Diner,” he said. “None of that stringy organic free-range bacon.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I feel like eggs Benedict.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll get sausage,” he said and kissed the smug smile off her face while they waited for the light.

Lacey bought a paper when they sat down at a table in the corner and after an unspoken discussion he ended up with the front page and sports section. The waitress took their order and hurried off. He

caught Lacey looking through the auction and property announcements in the Local News section as they sipped coffee.

“Do you ever stop working?” he asked.

The paper lowered with a crisp snap. “How many people have come through the door since we were seated?”

“Eleven. Six females, four males, one juvenile. Eight people left, if you’re interested.”

She quirked one finely arched eyebrow at him. He winked. When the waitress approached, she folded the paper away to make room for the platters of food. She ate most of her eggs Benedict, which turned out to be a soft-cooked egg with ham on an English muffin. He finished everything he ordered, then polished off her fancy eggs.

A good chunk of the city’s upper middle class was meandering aimlessly through Whole Foods. Lacey shopped like she worked her BlackBerry, plowing through the aisles at a steady pace.

“I like your focus,” he commented as she tossed three boxes of crackers into her moving cart.

“You wouldn’t like me so much on Madison Avenue in New York,” she said, pausing for two seconds to choose between prepackaged salmon fillets. “Cooking for one doesn’t take much effort. Are you working tonight?”

“Nope.”

“Dinner and a DVD?”

“*300*? You said you haven’t seen it.”

Not quite hiding a pleased smile, she added two steaks to the cart. That weird electric signal from his heart started up again, because if staying around for dinner and a movie was all it took to make her happy, then this wouldn’t be so hard.

She set off for the cheese section, weaving between a family of five that wouldn’t have been out of place in a commune and two

perfectly made-up women, skin taut from too much plastic surgery. Lacey tried all the cheese samples before choosing two, then turned to the olives, talking to herself while she considered and discarded plastic 152

tubs. Out of habit, Hunter scanned the crowd. More beards, braids and Birkenstocks, although several men were freshly shaved and wearing trendy dark jeans and sweaters.

One man in particular seemed to share Hunter's fascination with Lacey. Blond hair neatly parted on the side, dark eyes, peanut-butter tan that comes from a bed, not from hours in the sun. He looked away when he felt Hunter watching him, checking his BlackBerry with studied attention. There was no ring on his wedding ring finger. Thirty seconds later the man looked at Lacey again, then at Hunter, hastily clicking and scrolling when he again made eye contact with Hunter.

Looks like a cocker spaniel…always on the BlackBerry…

"Do you eat olives?" Lacey asked, her head in the refrigerated case.

"Yeah," he said, folding his arms across his chest. "Is that your ex by the wine?" Lacey straightened, a tub of olives in each hand, and followed Hunter's gaze, over the cheese station, through a group of bored-looking teenage girls. Although the man had turned his back, Lacey said, "That's Davis." Awkward. Very awkward, even if twelve hours before he hadn't had Davis's ex-wife handcuffed and naked for an unorthodox interrogation. But Lacey wasn't blushing as Davis turned to them and made one of those fake "oh, I just saw you" nods, so Hunter wouldn't, either.

For a moment he thought the exchange of nods would be it, but Davis spoke to someone beside him, then made his way through the crowd to Lacey. A couple of inches shorter than Hunter, Lacey's ex-husband wore khakis and a button down shirt under a v-neck sweater. The blonde haired, blue-eyed woman holding Davis's hand had on a black tracksuit that showed off her slender, toned body

and the ponytail and lip gloss made her look like she'd just come from the gym, or maybe babysitting in the gym's day care.

After setting both tubs of olives in the cart, Lacey gave Davis a professional smile, then turned to the woman he introduced as Brianna.

"So nice to meet you," Lacey said.

"And you as well," Brianna replied, remarkably calm for a woman meeting her boyfriend's ex-wife. Her whole demeanor radiated the settled, confident attitude of someone who's never worried about money, or much of anything.

Lacey introduced him to a round of firm handshakes.

"How was dinner with Shane Baldwin?" Davis asked with a sideways glance at Hunter.

Dinner with Baldwin? Hunter kept his face blank as he waited for Lacey's reply.

"Oh, fine," she said, but her gaze flickered to his face, then back again. Not much of a break in Lacey's cool façade, but enough to tell him something was up.

"I hear you're the front runner to arrange financing for his outdoor shopping plaza."

"I can't discuss clients, Davis," she said with just the right touch of regret.

"I hope you get the deal," he said and there was nothing snarky about it.

Brianna lifted a take out coffee cup to her lips and a rainbow exploded on her ring finger as an enormous diamond caught the

overhead lights. He, Lacey and Davis all focused on the ring.

This time Davis's laugh was a little more nervous. "Brianna and I, uh…got engaged last weekend," he said.

"Congratulations," Lacey said, both her smile and voice sincere enough to make the well wishes sound heart felt. "I hope you'll be very happy together." Arms crossed over his chest, Hunter watched the scene unfold as if observing it for a report. The only thing that really stuck out to him was how freaking polite everyone was to everyone else. At least once a week he went to a domestic disturbance call where mothers screamed at fathers and children screamed at parents. Sometimes, just for fun, the extended family got involved and everyone screamed at everyone else until he got things quieted down and sorted out.

At least that was visible and honest. This practiced calm angered him. They were so smooth, so polished, Lacey, Davis and Brianna all wearing identical controlled, polite looks as they smiled and chatted. No one talked about what was going on underneath the surface. It felt just like the cocktail party at the Metropolitan Club, surrounded by people whose lives sailed smoothly from birth to death, through private schools and expensive colleges, into gated subdivisions, luxury sedans and vacations in places he couldn't pronounce. And all the while men hooked up with younger women, alcoholic investment bankers hired teenage runaways to suck them off in an alley, or mothers left their families for better pickings and everyone pretended nothing was wrong.

Lacey looked up at Hunter. "How about a baguette to go with the steaks tonight?" He jerked out of his tense reflections because he'd watched emotion come and go on Lacey's expressive face, but this was the first time he'd seen desperation. She looked at him, Brianna looked at Davis and Davis eyed Hunter with a smug certainty that set Hunter's teeth on edge. "Sounds great," he said.

Lacey broke the scene by aiming her cart toward the bread section. "It was good to see you, Davis. Brianna."

"You, too, Lacey," Davis said. Brianna gave them a cursory smile as she began to pick through the olive tubs.

Hunter followed Lacey to the bakery. “That was polite.” And by *polite* he meant fucking weird.

“I can’t believe he’s already engaged to her,” Lacey said in a low voice.

It occurred to him that maybe Lacey’s studied calm stemmed not from some genetic response to conflict but from a real attempt to keep it together. “Did he screw around with her while you were married?” he said, fury flashing through him like a concussion grenade.

“No,” she said quietly. “They work together but he says he didn’t and I believe him.

He’s just always liked having someone around and she suits him perfectly.” He didn’t get the special emphasis on *perfectly*, but her words were matter-of-fact, not bitter. The flare of anger melted in his veins. Some day, when emotions weren’t so high, he’d ask her about the divorce. “Brianna doesn’t look old enough to be a lawyer.” She shot him a look of sharp amusement. “She’s not a lawyer. She was his paralegal. I think she’s been transferred to another attorney with the firm, but she’ll quit working before she walks down the aisle. There are perks to marrying a partner in the best firm in town. That ring must have cost him twenty thousand dollars.” Hunter went still for a moment. Twenty thousand dollars for an engagement ring?

He looked speculatively at Lacey as she examined each loaf of French bread before choosing one and putting it in the cart. He didn’t have twenty thousand dollars. He lived pretty much paycheck to paycheck and until he started dating Lacey, he’d never thought about it.

Lacey bought the groceries. He waited until they were in the Charger and on the way back to her house before he asked, “When

was the dinner with Baldwin?"

"The night before you showed up at my house with a hangover." So when he'd been sitting with an abandoned kid she'd been dining with a multi-millionaire, probably at Le Pain or somewhere like it, pricey, fancy. And the next night he was spilling his guts on her sofa, without even knowing she'd had an important dinner. Hell, he still had only a vague understanding of what she did and how all the players and pieces fit together.

"You were invited," she said.

He looked at her. Her eyes were solemn, soft. "To dinner?" At her nod, he went on.

"That's why you were calling me?"

"No, I called because I wanted to talk to you, but yes, I wanted to invite you to dinner." Her voice trailed off. "Shane asked about you. Said to tell you hello." What did he say to that? *Maybe another time?* Would there be another time? He settled on, "That was nice of him."

"I didn't tell you about it because it seemed…unimportant after the day you'd had.

It was just dinner," she said with a shrug.

He parked in her driveway and killed the engine, then draped one arm over the steering wheel as he turned to face her. "It was important to you." And he'd missed it, didn't know a fucking thing about it, but her ex did. If he hadn't seen that uncomfortable exchange between the two of them, he might have thought she was still talking to Davis. More likely someone Davis knew saw Lacey with Baldwin at the restaurant and mentioned it to him.

No one he knew would have dinner at Le Pain on a weeknight, if ever. Or recognize Baldwin, a businessman who, with Lacey's help, would probably pour millions of dollars into the city's economy.

"Don't worry about it," she said, reminding him of her response to her ruined bedding.

He'd worry about whatever he damn well pleased. She was in the act of opening her door, but he put his hand on her arm to stop her. "How did it go?"

"Well," she said. "I'm pulling together a couple of financing options for him. Things look promising."

He let her go. Together they grabbed the bags from the back seat, but he kept his jacket on as he helped her put the groceries away.

"I'm going out," he said casually.

"Okay," she said, not pausing in the act of running water into her kettle to make a cup of tea. "I might run to the mall later. Just let yourself in if I'm not here."

"Lock up behind me." He fished his keys from his jacket pocket. She followed him to the door. A quick kiss and he left.

* * * * *

Hunter pulled into one of the angled parking spaces lining the brick-paved streets of SoMa, the city's trendy, outdoor shopping district bordered by Sorrell and Mason. It looked like a gigantic hand had lifted Whole Foods and shaken the same groups of people out onto SoMa's sidewalks and alleys. Hippie kids clustered around a boy strumming away on a guitar, the case open at his feet to expose a few bills and some coins resting on worn red velvet. The kid was probably busking without a permit but he'd leave that to the guys from the Eastern. More useful to the economy, women in designer jeans and sunglasses walked by in groups of two or three, shopping bags dangling negligently from their arms.

Before he left Lacey's bed earlier in the morning he'd taken a quick look at the tag on the comforter cover he'd ruined. At his apartment he'd Google'd the brand. Only one store in the city carried the bedding. Bells tinkled as he opened the door to Sweet Dreams, a

store that, according to their website, sold nothing but luxury sheets, pillowcases and other bedding.

This looked like a place Lacey would shop. The walls of the tiny store were lined, floor-to-ceiling, with cedar shelving stocked with fabrics in all the colors of the rainbow.

A wooden ladder on rails ran the length of the walls, to reach the higher cubbies. Two tables in the middle of the space held more stacks of sheets and pillowcases. A hint of something floral lay over the cedar. Lavender, maybe. Soft music played from the CD

player over the sales counter.

“May I help you?” the sales woman asked.

Relieved this was going to be easy, he pointed at Lacey’s comforter cover, prominently displayed in the center of the largest table. “I’ll take one of those.” 156

“The Chatelaine duvet cover. It’s truly a work of art. Each one is made from the finest silk and hand-embroidered in France,” she said, as if he hadn’t said he was going to buy one. “What size?”

“King,” he said. “In the green.”

“Yes, the Silky Seafoam,” she said, deftly extracting an untouched comforter from the bottom of a drawer in the table. “May I help you choose anything else? Shams?

Pillowcases?”

“That’s it,” he said and reached into his inner coat pocket for his wallet.

Still smiling at him over her red half-rim glasses, the sales woman scanned the bar code on the package as he pulled out his Mastercard and tapped it on the counter. He handed it over when she looked at him expectantly then glanced at the digital display of

the total while she swiped the card.

1459.26, lit up in green on the register's display.

Holy. Shit.

He froze as he stared at the amount, for a brief moment praying the card wouldn't get rejected.

"Would you like this gift wrapped?"

"No."

He was close to his limit, within a thousand bucks or so but maybe the last payment had cleared… The machine spit out the receipt for him to sign, then a copy for his records.

As he scrawled his name at the bottom of the biggest charge he'd ever made, the sales woman wrapped the duvet cover in tissue, tied it off with wide red ribbon and tucked it into a cream shopping bag.

"Would you like the receipt with you or in the bag?"

"The bag," he said.

She handed him fifteen hundred dollars worth of embroidered silk. "Enjoy it," she said with a smile.

He automatically noted the time when he got back in the Charger. Five minutes had passed in the store. He'd just spent fifteen hundred dollars in five minutes. That was a record. Fifteen hundred dollars was three payments on his car, plus a bike payment. It was an entire month of living expenses. Rent, groceries and food, insurance, utilities, phone, cable and Internet.

The streets of SoMa were filled with pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages, so he paid close attention as he drove out of the shopping district and into the streets of downtown. From there the car seemed to drive itself, down along the river and out to the scenic overlook at the city's botanical gardens. Cops from the Eastern came here to write reports or make calls but for now the lot was empty.

He angled the Charger so the rear end backed to a retaining wall but he could see the river flowing south and east. For a long time he sat there, the engine running, the 157

radio tuned to an alternative rock station that broadcast from the local university. The weakening fall sun cast the bluffs in stark shades of buff, tan and black. Searching for the path of least resistance, the river flowed in a channel carved from the soft rock, doubling back on itself where the marshy ground gave way.

After a while he opened the bag and carefully unwrapped the tissue from around the duvet cover. The silk shone dully in the setting sun, faintly rough under his finger as he traced the embroidery, intricate trees and flowers rippling along the edge of the material, then cascading to the center where one large tree spread roots and leaves.

Even to his untrained, largely disinterested eye, it was beautiful. Luxurious in its simplicity. Perfect for Lacey.

He thought about Whole Foods, Eggs Benedict, twenty-thousand dollar engagement rings, and BMWs. He thought about sex, about trust and emotions, about friendship and love, about uniforms and fifteen hundred dollars of hand-embroidered silk. He thought about who he was, what he had to offer, how he felt and what Lacey needed.

Thinking changed nothing. It never had. Neither had wishing or dreaming. There was reality and cold, hard facts. He operated in a black-and-white world defined by accumulated experience, where he acted based on his experiences.

It was time to act.

The sun was a half circle of red haze in his rear view mirror before he put the car in first and drove slowly out of the lot. His route back to Lacey's house took him past La Cucina and Juana's, past the Metropolitan Club, past Memorial Park, the scene of several walks

and soul-altering sex in the rain. But eventually, he pulled into Lacey's driveway, then made his way up the two white steps to her front porch.

* * * * *

From her position at the sink Lacey heard the front door open shortly after five. She shook off the suds into the dishwater, then dried her hands before opening the fridge to remove the platter holding the marinating steaks.

She set the platter on the counter before shouldering through the kitchen door.

Hunter stood in the foyer, his dark head bent, hands shoved in his front jeans pockets.

His demeanor was such a contrast to his usual alert, observational attitude she came up short in her progress to greet him, stopping behind the sofa, a few feet from the foyer.

"Hi," she said. "Everything okay?"

Then she saw the bag from Sweet Dreams, on the floor beside his gym bag. For a moment emotions warred inside her, tenderness, dismay, gratitude, respect. But the bottom dropped out of her stomach when he lifted his head and looked at her. She'd seen that look before, two years earlier, in Davis's eyes.

Suddenly cold, she folded her arms across her chest and looked away for a few seconds. "Hunter, you didn't need to do that."

"Yes I did," he said, pulling his hands from his pockets as he said it.

When he spoke in that quiet, firm voice, there was no option other than, "Thank you."

“You’re welcome.”

He still wore his jacket, had his keys in hand. The powerful wings stretched out, ready for the launch into flight.

If she kept talking, he wouldn’t leave. “Are you coming in?” Both by birth and by training, she suspected, Hunter kept his emotions close to his chest. Right now his face was carved from stone, his eyes as impenetrable as the forest, an expression suitable for a head of state’s security detail.

Or a man ending a relationship. Was that the other secret lesson men learned in health class, how to remain perfectly stoic when you walked away from a woman?

“Not tonight.”

“Ever?”

His nostrils flared as he drew in a slow breath. “Lacey, I just don’t see this going anywhere long term.”

Here it was, the ending she’d known would be coming from the moment she looked over her shoulder at Buff and saw the man she wanted to take to her empty bed.

But knowing the end would come didn’t mean she wouldn’t fight it.

“I do.” There, she’d said it, not what she meant, not what she’d learned last night, but close enough for him to guess her meaning. If he wanted.

“Me and you?” He shook his head. “It’s a nice thought. Maybe in the movies, but not in real life.”

“Why not?”

“Because women like you don’t stay with men like me.” The words cost him something, maybe more than he thought they would, because his jaw snapped closed, his hand tightening convulsively around his keys.

This was new. This was weird and she had no strategy for dealing with it.

“How do you know that?” she asked, hearing the desperation in her voice. “I agree there are no guarantees in life, but I don’t exactly have a history of flitting from man to man. If Davis hadn’t left me, we’d still be married.”

“You’ll find someone else. Someone like him,” he said, as if that would reassure her. “There’s a doctor or lawyer or banker in this city who will give you what you deserve.”

“What do I deserve?”

“Someone who can take care of you the way you should be taken care of,” he said with a nod at the bag from Sweet Dreams.

“I take care of me, Hunter.” Now she sounded as flat as he did. “I make my own money. There are very few men in this city who out-earn me and I have a very large 159

trust fund, leaving me with a very small pool from which to choose if my goal were a man who could support me. I married for love the first time and if I marry again, it will be for the same reason. Never for money.”

One hand on his hip, he palmed the back of his neck, then shook his head. “You make it sound like the money doesn’t matter and maybe when it comes to buying things, it doesn’t. But it does matter, Lacey. It matters because you went to private schools and I went to public schools. You know things about wine and food and music and the world. The people you hang out with know those things, too. I don’t. I read three books about Thermoplyae two years ago and haven’t read a book since. I can’t make small talk. I work nights and weekends and holidays, cleaning up after the ugly, brutal things in the world you’re protected from.” She couldn’t decide who he insulted more, himself or her. Either way she wasn’t listening to another word. “That’s enough.”

The whip-like quality in her voice made him look at her, his gaze sharp. A vibrating silence reigned for a long moment, then he lifted his hand to his chest and rubbed the base of his thumb against his breastbone. “Lacey, we have a good time together. But physical compatibility isn’t—“

“Physical compatibility? You think the sex was so shockingly good because our pheromones are a good match, not that we are?” She shook her head in disbelief. “I didn’t deceive myself into thinking I was the first woman to ask you to play bad cop, but I envy you if sex is that wonderful every time you have it.”

“I told you. It isn’t.” This time his voice cracked into the room.

“Then what? I don’t understand. This isn’t where you want to be anymore?” she said, hearkening back to their conversation at Juana’s.

“That’s not it.”

She stood her ground. “I like you. I think you like me. What more do you want?”

“It’s not about what I want.” For the first time in three months, she saw frustration, irritation as Hunter shoved his hand over his crew cut. “It’s about what you’re going to want, what you need, what you deserve.”

“Stop saying that. This isn’t about me. I’m where I want to be and I know what I want. I want you.” Her voice broke. She realized she was holding on to the back of the sofa in a grip so tight her knuckles were white. She swallowed and released the sofa frame. “This is about you. Don’t push it off on me.” More silence, broken by the tick-tock-tick-tock of the grandfather clock, while he stared at her and she stared at him.

“If you want to go, then go,” she finally said. She wanted to say *I love you, please don’t go, I’m begging you* but experience had taught her it wouldn’t make any difference and she needed her pride intact. Something would have to keep her on her feet after he walked out the door.

"I don't want to go," he said. It sounded like ground glass, not his vocal cords, formed the words. "But I have to. This won't get any easier." He picked up his gym bag and opened the door, pausing in the frame to look back at her, his eyes bleak green pools in his stony face. Cold air swept in from outdoors. For a brief, irrational moment her fingertips tingled with the horrible, horrifying urge to snatch a paperweight from the end table and hurl it at his head.

Once again, a century's worth of breeding saved her, but not even a straight line of descent from the Mayflower through the Memphis Greenwoods could make her respond when he said, "Bye." She let the door close behind him to silence.

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Chapter Seventeen

Hunter braced his hands on a length of drywall stretched between two sawhorses and blew his breath out, hard. “I screwed up the cut, Dad.” With a jerk and zip, Michael Anderson retracted his tape measure into the case and met his son’s gaze. “Measure twice and cut once. You heard that instead of nursery rhymes. Where’s your head?”

His dad’s teasing tone softened the caustic words, but Hunter knew he’d prematurely ended the day’s work with the mistake. Getting more drywall to rebuild the kitchen wall around a new breakfast nook and three season room was on his dad’s list of things to do. Tomorrow. With the right cut, a few screws and some drywall tape and mud, he worked a full day and stayed on schedule. As things stood now he was done at three in the afternoon.

But Hunter’s head wasn’t in the work and they both knew it.

“Toss me the keys to the truck. I’ll run to the lumber yard,” Hunter said. “It won’t take an hour.”

His dad yanked the power cord to the nail gun out of the wall outlet. “Never mind.

I’ll make it up tomorrow. Jorge’s back from vacation and I’m ahead on the Saunders job.”

“You sure?” It wasn’t like his dad to quit early.

“Yeah,” Michael said as he shrugged out of his suspender tool belt and rubbed his shoulders. “I must have lifted something wrong. My neck and back have been killing me the last week or so.”

Hunter looked more closely at his father. “You seen a doctor about it?”

“Nah. I’ll take some aspirin, get a massage, see if that helps.” He sat

down on an overturned bucket emptied of drywall mud. “So what’s up? That’s your second mistake in a couple of weeks. Usually you’re sharper than that.”

“Nothing,” Hunter said. “Work, eat, sleep, repeat.” A sharp look from his father told him his days of ducking the tough conversation were over. “You still seeing Lacey Meyers?”

“No.”

That was a half-truth. He still saw her, but only at night, in dreams. For the most part, they were simple images of her sitting on her deck with a book in her lap, or walking in the park, her red hair lit from behind by the setting sun. But every few nights he had an intensely erotic dream, more feverish and simple than the warrior dream. Buried inside her slick, tight pussy, in his mind he tortured them both with achingly slow thrusts, watched her go pink under him, her face tighten, her teeth clamp 162

down on her lower lip as he relentlessly drove her to orgasm. He saw her face wrench with ecstasy, felt the contractions around his cock, heard her satisfied gasps. He felt her hands on his nape and lower back, her legs wind around his hips, welcoming his rough, heated plunges into her body as he barreled toward his own climax.

To his teeth-grinding frustration he always woke up seconds before he came, the orgasm pounding in the head of his cock. It was his punishment for walking out on Lacey, to satisfy her in his dreams but wake up so hard he could pound nails with his dick.

What he needed was to imprint another body in his mind. He knew a couple of girls who wouldn’t care that he hadn’t called for months and wouldn’t expect anything the next morning. But he couldn’t bring himself to scroll through his contacts for the numbers, let alone push Talk and make the call.

“What happened?”

“Just died a natural death, Dad,” he said, but the scrutiny made him

squirm.

Another lie. He'd killed it and for the rest of his life he would remember the white pain on Lacey's face when he walked out her front door.

He'd done that to her. He owned his actions, knew it was the right thing to do, but he felt like a thousand kinds of shit for doing it the day after the role play. What good was staying the night after a bar hookup if, three months later, he cuffed her and made her beg, then walked away?

Ten thousand kinds of shit, no doubt about it.

But it had to be done. It had to. End it now, before he passed the point of no return, before they both got hurt. Worse.

He was lying. He was a coward, a fucking *coward*, too scared to face his fears, too scared to move on.

His father took a deep breath, the full-chested inhales more frequent the last few times Hunter had see him. "You know, kid," his dad said, very conversationally, "at some point in time you're going to have to trust someone besides me and other cops." He meant someone not bound to Hunter by blood or the brotherhood. He meant a woman. But just because he knew what his father meant, knew why he kept people at arms' length, didn't mean he could just turn on a dime and be someone else.

"Sure. No problem," Hunter said, trying for flippant. The words fell flat in the stark, echoing space.

"I'm not saying it has to be Lacey Meyers. But the last couple of months—"

"Dad."

"You had a life," his father said, ignoring the warning in Hunter's voice. "You weren't work, sleep, eat, repeat."

"Dad. It's over."

His father almost never called him by name. He used Hunter’s name when he was in so much trouble as a teenager he wouldn’t go anywhere but school-work-bedroom for weeks. His dad called him “kid”, or “son” when he was proud of Hunter.

Graduations, mostly. High school, college, the Academy. But right now, based on the look on his father’s surprisingly pale face, he wasn’t proud of his only son.

Hunter wasn’t in trouble, either. Michael Anderson was worried about him, his six-foot-two-hundred-and-twenty-pound-police-officer offspring. Great. Just great. He’d hurt Lacey so bad she couldn’t, or wouldn’t, even say goodbye to him and now he was adding to his father’s stress.

“I know I’ve been off the past couple of weeks, Dad. It was…harder than I thought it would be. But I’ll be fine. Just…cut me some slack, okay?”

“You don’t need me to cut you some slack, Hunter. You need to cut yourself some slack. Take a chance.”

“I know. I know,” he said. “I will.”

Eventually. Just not with Lacey. Not that Lacey would spit on him if he was on fire after what he’d done. But he would take that chance. Some day. With someone safer than the woman who made his heart beat static-filled messages to him before he went to bed at night, when he was zoned-out in the car, driving his sector, seeing what was going on. He still hadn’t figured out what it meant, but he was getting used to it as part of the background noise of life.

Like Lacey was for a little while. At least he still had this remnant of her in his heart.

But it was over.

Life went on. He stood and unbuckled his tool belt. “Come on,” he said to his dad as he hefted the belt. “Let’s clean up and go to a movie.”

* * * * *

“Hold on a minute, hon!” Lacey shouted into her BlackBerry, hoping Claire could hear her over the quintessential New York City street cacophony. A minivan with Missouri license plates had blocked the box at the intersection of Fifty-Seventh and Fifth in front of Tiffany and Co, and an ambulance stuck behind several yellow taxis was trying to get through. The taxi drivers laid on their horns and the combined honking almost but didn’t quite drown out the ambulance’s siren. Lacey turned and pushed back through the Fifth Avenue entrance into Tiffany to wait out the noise.

“Having fun, sweetie?”

She found a plush chair near the exit to Fifty-Seventh Street and sank into it. “Oh, yes,” she said, trying to match the artificially bright tone in Claire’s voice. “I’ve had a great time so far. I went to the theatre last night and do you remember that tiny burger place at the corner of Eighty-Fourth and Madison, underneath the secondhand shop where Jackie Kennedy took her clothes? I had a burger there, too, then spent the 164

afternoon walking through Central Park. Tonight I’m ordering room service, though, because I’m exhausted…”

She ran down, like a windup doll on its last turn of the key. Silence reigned on the other end of the phone, then Claire said, “Oh, sweetie.” Lacey got to her feet and pushed through the heavy brass revolving door, striding briskly east on Fifty-Seventh, away from the Midtown traffic mess. It was the sharp November wind that brought tears to her eyes, not the kind sympathy in her friend’s voice, not the fact that Hunter had been gone for two weeks and

she ached more with every passing day. “I’m fine, Claire. I’m fine. He left and I’m fine. Really.”

“Of course you are.”

“Because we both knew this wasn’t permanent. It wasn’t like we had a relationship or anything. We had sex. Lots of it. That’s not a relationship. It was just sex. And that’s all I wanted. Sex.”

The anonymity of the city made her forget that other people could hear her. When a businessman moving at approximately her pace gave her a quick glance, then another, she blushed and looked away, but not before she noted a nice face, softer than Hunter’s, with curious, amused blue eyes and full lips. The breeze caught his Burberry raincoat and gorgeous silk tie, buffeting both around his lean body. Investment banker? Lawyer?

Fortune 500 exec? All of the above were thick on the ground in Midtown Manhattan.

He’d obviously heard her. They stopped for the light at Madison Avenue and this time the glance lasted longer and came with an interested smile.

“I know, sweetie,” Claire said, recalling her to reality.

“And now I’m done having casual sex,” she said into the phone, looking her new admirer straight in the eye.

“My loss,” he said whimsically, then stepped out into the stalled traffic. He moved with a confident, easy grace that almost made her call him back. Almost. Instead she bit back the words and a hysterical laugh.

“You’re not cut out for casual sex,” Claire said, oblivious. Away from the honking and siren Lacey could now hear baby Lanie fussing in the background. “You have to keep sex like that on your terms and you’re just too soft to do that.”

“I did keep the sex on my terms,” she replied as she reached the far side of Madison and continued east on Fifty-Seventh. “We did everything I wanted to do and I mean everything.” Oh God, that

whole-house role play that went so far beyond a teasing *Are you a bad girl?* Would she ever be able to look a police officer in the eye again? “Things I’ll never ever do again with anyone else. But that’s the problem. I did those things because I felt something for him, something I’ve never felt before, not even with Davis.

But it was just more sex to him.”

Her throat went tight as she said it, but she fought down the swelling, the tears.

She’d come to New York for a long weekend of shopping, theater, live music and restaurants to get away from the painful memories surprising her in every corner of her house. In the past Claire would have joined her for the trip. This time she was alone.

“I could kill him,” Claire said conversationally. “Guys like him know the rules of the hookup. Hell, they *write* the rules. He broke them. No jury in the world will convict me for the pain I’ll inflict on him if I ever see him.” The thought of feisty Claire smelling of spit-up and baby powder while she went toe-to-toe with Hunter made Lacey let out a half-laugh, half-sob as she came to a halt at Park Avenue. “Don’t go to jail on my account,” she said.

“I’d do it for you,” Claire said. “Just say the word.”

“Thanks, but not necessary. I’m partially to blame. I knew the rules, too.” At the next lull in traffic Lacey crossed partway, stopping in the median separating the northbound and southbound traffic on Park Avenue. Light from the illuminated Christmas trees standing in the wide, fallow planter shone on the creases in the cheeks of the quick-witted businessman. He studiously focused on the river of taxis, livery cars and personal vehicles streaming by inches away, waiting for a break in traffic, or the light.

Claire’s next words came over baby Lanie’s wails, now reaching a crescendo. “I have to go. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” Lacey said.

She slipped her BlackBerry back in the pocket of her quilted Talbot’s jacket. After a morning of shopping she’d left her purse in the hotel room safe and taken the Lexington Avenue line north to 86th Street for the burger, then walked the thirty blocks south through the park. The day had been bright, clear and crisp, perfect walking weather. The carefully designed winding paths of Central Park gave her plenty of space to meander and empty her mind. But she’d kept the BlackBerry with her. Just in case.

The Burberry-clad man looked south, his profile clean and sharp, his sandy brown hair ruffling in the breeze. He turned and quirked an eyebrow at her.

“Hi there.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Where I live there aren’t any people on the sidewalks.”

“Not from around here, then.”

“The Midwest,” she said, not eager to give out specifics.

“In town for business?”

“Pleasure, actually,” she said. “A long weekend.” He looked up and down Park Avenue, then back at her, a small smile on his mouth.

“Either way, sounds like you could use a drink.” Is this how it always started? Over a drink in a bar? “A drink sounds lovely,” she said. “I’m staying at Hotel 57.”

“The Opia’s a nice bar,” he said. Just like that they were crossing the street together.

“Will Thompson,” he said.

“Lacey,” she said.

He looked at her, open amusement on his square-jawed face. “You have a last name, Lacey?”

Oh, God. “Not just yet,” she replied, smiling to soften the implied rejection.

“Fair enough, Lacey-with-no-last-name.”

He wasn’t Hunter, but he had a nice smile and an air of confident experience she found comfortable. He held the door for her and put his hand at the small of her back to guide her into the lounge area, a touch that was less off-putting than she might have imagined. He bought her a glass of wine and talked easily about his work as an investment banker and living in the city, then bought her another glass and asked all the right questions about commercial mortgages, her business, her background. A Yale grad with an MBA from Wharton, a full partner at Goldman, he was thirty-eight, unmarried and clearly captivated.

In other words, perfect.

Darkness had fallen by the time he asked if she wanted a third drink.

“No, thank you, Will,” she said as she stretched, then tucked her hair behind her ears. “I am at my limit.”

“Dinner? Sparks does a really nice steak, or I can probably get us into Nobu if you feel like rubbing shoulders with celebrities.” His smile was so open and inviting, so easy. His hair fell forward, brushing the top of his collar and curling over his ears, but the look wasn’t metrosexual, just too busy making gazillions to get a hair cut.

She wondered how the texture of softly curling hair would compare to a buzz cut’s bristle against her fingers, if he would kiss with the same laidback confidence he currently radiated. She wondered how it would feel to let him take off her clothes, piece by piece, lay her back the hotel’s fine cotton sheets and do his best to make her

forget the man who walked out her front door without a backward glance.

Hunter was *gone*. He was many things, but wishy-washy didn't make the list. She had to move on.

"I'd love to go to dinner with you." She smoothed her hands over her dark-wash jeans. "Come upstairs while I get changed?"

Hooking up was slightly easier the second time. To his credit Will didn't act like she'd extended an invitation. He even stayed on the opposite side of the slow, small elevator. Before she could extract the key to her room from her pocket, however, he cupped her jaw with one hand, bent his head and kissed her. The touch of his lips was light but not tentative, more of the same confident openness he'd been offering and if he didn't send wildfire racing through her bloodstream, there was a warm hum as his mouth met hers and his thumb stroked her cheek.

It was a pale imitation, but she had to start somewhere. Hunter was gone. Maybe this was all she could expect.

He drew back, his blue eyes searching hers. When he kissed her again the hand not holding his trench coat slid to the nape of her neck and his lips more firmly suggested she open to him. She did, felt a slight uptick in the hum when his tongue touched hers.

When he pulled away the amusement was largely gone from his gaze, replaced by a sensual confidence and anticipation.

"Yes?" he asked.

She took a step back as she felt for her key in her jacket pocket. She inserted it into the lock and met his eyes when the light went from red to green.

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Chapter Eighteen

Hunter shifted the Charger into neutral and coasted into Lacey's driveway, then looked at the dashboard clock, bright green in the late-November morning gloom. Six-fifty a.m. He stared at the house, sizing up the situation. The light in her bathroom was on but flicked off as he watched. She was probably halfway through her regular morning routine, showered and on her way downstairs in her robe and slippers for her second cup of coffee as she read the paper. Not expecting anyone, least of all him.

And no matter the events of the last eight hours, he had no fucking business walking up the steps to her front porch, day or night. When the nurses kicked him out for his dad's pre-op prep, he sat in the hallway until the thump of his pulse in his ears became almost unbearable. Pacing helped drown it out, but the nursing staff's sidelong glances told him he needed to let off steam someplace else.

Sitting around the hospital was a no-risk activity that would drive him crazy.

Knocking on Lacey's door was going to take more courage than anything he'd faced on the job, given that he had no right to be here. None at all, but if she came to the door in her robe, still soft and sleepy, maybe, just maybe she'd forget what he'd done.

A stifled, bitter laugh huffed out of him. There was no chance in hell she'd forgotten, let alone forgiven, but he had to try. As hard as it was for him to live with himself for the last four weeks, he was as good as gutted if he didn't try.

He got out of the Charger and walked up the path, treading lightly on the steps. His finger was an inch away from her doorbell when the front door flew open.

"Jesus!" He put a hand on his right hip as he took a step back.

Lacey stood in the doorway, wearing black heels, an ankle-length

black wool coat fitted to her curves, a scarf the color of an evergreen tree, and black leather gloves. Her purse hung from the crook of her elbow, her laptop bag was on one shoulder, her keys were in one hand and the ever-present BlackBerry was in the other.

It took him a split second to recover from the shock and take in her very alert, professional demeanor. Then he fixed his gaze on her face. Fierce joy surged in her eyes and his heart jumped hard against his breastbone. Then she blinked and the gates slammed closed, leaving behind only guarded blankness.

He recognized the look. He'd learned the thousand-yard-stare in the Academy, made an art of it on city streets. She'd learned it the hard way. His gifts to Lacey were a comforter cover she returned the same afternoon he walked out and the knowledge that you couldn't trust anyone, ever, under any circumstances, because they'd fuck you and then fuck you over.

Especially him. He'd made his bed and now he'd lie in it.

"Forget it," he said. He turned away, disdaining the stairs in his eagerness to get away from his impenetrable walls reflected in her eyes.

"Hunter. What's happened?"

Her voice wasn't angry, or even nasty. It was just as polite and composed as the tone she'd used with Davis and Brianna.

Fuck, it hurt to hear that tone directed at him. He stopped but kept his gaze on the slate slabs that made up her sidewalk. Why not tell her? He couldn't feel any more raw than he did right now. Besides, she would wonder. Worry. Despite the distant, cool voice, she was too good not to.

"My dad had a heart attack last night. He's having triple bypass surgery this morning and I…I just wanted…"

What did he want? To erase the last month? If he got a do-over for the last four weeks, he'd make his dad go to the doctor after the third sick day and before the neck and back pain, two less-common signals of an impending heart attack. He'd figure out he loved Lacey when his heart started the weird, subtle pulsing in her shower, not somewhere around three a.m. while he sat by his father's hospital bed, holding his hand, staring at each tick on the heartbeat monitor that meant his dad was alive for another second, and another, and another.

Gut-churning fear caused by a terrible loss of control did bring clarity. The ticks of his father's heartbeat on the monitor deciphered the rhythmic thumping keeping pace with his own heart ever since that last night with Lacey.

You love…you love…you love…

He loved her. He had for a month, but didn't recognize the emotion until God-life-the universe-karma took him down with the body blow of nearly losing his father.

Reorganized his priorities. Whatever.

Lacey said nothing.

At least he'd tried. The reality was he had no right to be here. Figuring out that the age difference, salary, cars, freaking roses in fireplaces, all of it didn't matter even when you were in a relationship couldn't give him back what he'd thrown away. Figuring out he loved her, *needed* her, didn't fix what he'd done.

He put his hands on his hips and tilted his head back to look at the leaf-less branches arching over his head, bare and black against the lightening sky. They looked like arteries, veins, capillaries and the silence behind him was as stark as the tree limbs.

Whatever he wanted, comfort, compassion, her by his side as he waited, he wasn't going to get it. He turned for one last look, her hair a living flame in the light from the open door. God, she was *beautiful*. He *loved* her. And he was *fucked*.

“You’ve got a big day ahead of you if you’re starting at seven. Sorry I bothered you,” he said, then strode down the path to his car.

Her heavy oak door slammed and her heels snapped rapid-fire against the slate. He assumed she was heading for the BMW but then she was in the Charger with him, all 170

swirling red hair and black Mary Poppins coat. She dumped her bags haphazardly on the floorboards, dialing her BlackBerry as she fought free from an entangling strap.

With two quick phone calls she bailed on her breakfast meeting and asked her assistant to clear her calendar for the day.

She hung up, tucked the BlackBerry away in her purse, then buckled the seat belt across her body. Hunter felt her eyes on him but just sat back in his seat, one elbow on the window, the other wrist on the steering wheel, eyes front. If he looked at her he might have a heart attack of his own.

“My calendar is totally clear. What time is the surgery?” she asked.

The polite reserve was gone. She sounded like herself, a cautious version, but herself.

He didn’t believe in second chances. God knew he lived as if they didn’t happen and God knew he didn’t deserve this one, if that’s what it was, not something in the ballpark of a pity fuck. He didn’t care. It was a start.

He started the car, put it in reverse and backed out of the driveway. “Nine. They’re prepping him now.”

“What happened?” she asked again.

He told her the details as he sped to the hospital, weaving in and out of early morning traffic on Hanover, accelerating through yellow lights. Last night he’d been zoned out in front of the TV when the shift LT called and said the EMTs had his dad in the back

of a bus on the way to the hospital. It didn't look good, he said. Hunter didn't remember driving to the hospital but he was there just in time to squeeze his father's hand before the ER staff took him away.

The memory of his father, white as paper, scared and looking for him, would stay with him forever. Hours later the doctor told him the angioplasty showed three major vessels were ninety percent blocked, or worse. He was stable. Triple bypass surgery in the morning.

He braked sharply into a parking space in the hospital parking lot, but had to force himself to slow down when Lacey broke into a staccato trot as he strode down hallways, past the cardiac nursing desk, into his dad's room.

The still man in the bed didn't look like his father, the angular lines of his face sharp under pale skin. How had he missed the warning signs, trouble breathing, back and neck pain, uncharacteristic sick days?

His father's eyes opened, the green irises vivid against the sheets, as he looked between Hunter and Lacey.

"Dad, you remember Lacey Meyers."

Lacey stepped up to the bed and squeezed his father's hand. "It's nice to see you again, Michael," she said.

"Not the best circumstances," his dad rasped out.

She laughed softly and gave his hand another squeeze. "No indeed," she said.

"We'll do it again when you're feeling better."

Interest sharpened his dad's focus, then he glanced at Hunter.

“Yeah? I’ll hold you to it.”

With another smile Lacey stepped back, giving Hunter room to hook the rolling stool with his foot and sit down by the bed. “How do you feel?” he asked for the thousandth time.

“I’ve got a catheter in me and I’m thirsty.”

“Nothing to drink until after the surgery, Dad.”

“Let me see if you’re allowed ice chips,” Lacey said.

When the swish of her coat faded in the hallway, Hunter turned back to his father.

“I love you, Dad.”

“Kid—“

“Thanks for raising me. I know it wasn’t what you expected and I know I wasn’t easy…” He stopped, swallowed down the lump in his throat.

“You were the best thing that ever happened to me.” The tight squeeze of his father’s hand was half its normal strength, but the emotion came through loud and clear. “The best things are never easy, Hunter.” He knew that now, in a way he never had before, but he still couldn’t talk around the lump. He just nodded.

After a soft knock on the door, Lacey came into the room and set a small cup of ice on the tray by the bed. “The nurse said they’re almost ready for you, so just a few of those. I’ll see you in a few hours, Michael.”

He helped his father scoop out a few ice chips, then just sat with him. When the nurses came to take his father to surgery, he gave his father one last awkward hug.

“Love you, Dad. See you soon.”

“Love you too, kid.”

It was the first time he'd said the words, even to his dad, or heard them from his father. They didn't say things like that. They didn't have to. He *knew* his dad loved him.

It was in every action, every decision, every sacrifice. That didn't stop hot tears from welling up his eyes as he watched until the swinging doors closed behind the gurney.

He swiped at his eyes with the cuff of his long-sleeved t-shirt, then set his hands on his hips and inhaled, deep and slow.

"The waiting room's this way," Lacey said, gesturing down a hall. "I gave your cell phone number to the nurses. They'll call every hour or so from the operating room, so if you want to wait somewhere else, we can do that." He fumbled his phone out of the case on his belt and double-checked to be sure the battery had juice and the ringer was on high and vibrate. "I'd rather stay here," he said.

"If it's okay with you."

"Wherever you're most comfortable," she said, her brown eyes soft.

They had the cardiac care waiting room to themselves, the muted televisions broadcasting twenty-four hour news coverage. She shed her coat and slid her bags under a chair along the back wall. "Have you eaten?" she asked.

He slumped into a chair with his back to the wall and closed his eyes. "I'm not hungry."

"I'm going to the cafeteria," she said. "I need coffee." When she returned she had a large white paper bag with her and two enormous cups of coffee. She set the bag on the coffee table, then popped open one lid to add creamer after creamer and five packets of sugar.

"It's scorching hot," she said after a sip. "I brought bagels and some

fruit, too."

"Thanks," he said, but didn't grab anything. While she was gone he'd figured out how to tell her what he had to tell her, but he waited until she had half the coffee and one bagel in her stomach before he spoke.

"Do you know Cecilia Bronson? She was Cecilia Hunter before she got married." She paused in the act of bringing the coffee to her lips, probably flipping through her mental Rolodex of friends and acquaintances. "Yes, but not well because she's ten or twelve years older than I am and she's lived in Chicago for years. Why?"

"She's my mother."

Silence.

He slid her a glance, found shocked comprehension in her eyes as she connected Cecilia's maiden name to his first name, as long-forgotten gossip resurfaced. He kept going, momentum helping ease the words from his throat.

"Thirty years ago Grandpa was renovating to her parents' house in Regal Park. Dad was helping. She was seventeen, he was eighteen. One thing led to another and they eloped. Her parents cut her off and Grandpa wasn't much happier. Six months later, I was born. Six months after that, she went back to her parents. She and Dad were living with me in a ten by twenty studio apartment not far from Juana's, so I can't say that I blame her."

But he did.

Lacey carefully set her coffee down on the end table, clasped her hands in her lap and met his eyes without flinching.

Too late to stop now. "Dad didn't tell me much, but I'm guessing a baby was a liability to a girl looking to marry someone from her social class. Dad got custody of me.

She had visitation rights. I remember a few visits. She'd spoil me rotten, cheeseburgers for breakfast, candy whenever I wanted, too much TV, new toys and clothes every time I saw her. The usual shit

non-custodial parents pull.

“One afternoon she was supposed to pick me up for the weekend. I’m waiting for her on the front steps. I was wearing my coat but I kept pulling my hat and mittens off.

I was four and if you think I’m a pain in the ass now, you should have seen me as a kid.

Dad kept putting them back on and I kept taking them off. It got darker and darker. She never showed. Dad made me come in at bedtime, but I made him let me sleep in my coat and clothes, because I was sure she was coming. Next morning, I was back on the steps. I waited all day. She never came. I haven’t seen her since.

“Dad told me later she’d remarried and moved with her new husband to Chicago. I know she has kids with him because when I was fifteen I skipped school and spent a day in the library looking through microfilms of the society pages. There were wedding photos. Birth announcements. Sometimes pictures of her and her new husband and kids at some party here in town.

“Every pysch eval I’ve ever taken says I have trust issues,” he said with a humorless smile. “Telling you this doesn’t make right what I did to you. All I can say is I’m sorry.” He was done talking, but the same momentum carried him out of the waiting room, away from what he might see in her eyes. In the bathroom he looked in the mirror for the first time in four weeks. Warm water streamed off his fingers, soaking the edge of his cuffs as he washed his hands.

He didn’t look different. With a shrug he reached for the paper towels, then went back to the waiting room.

Lacey sat on the edge of her chair, her hands curving gently around her coffee cup.

Without smiling she watched him come and sit beside her. Then she

handed him his own coffee.

“It’s a little cool now. I’ll get fresh if you want.”

“It’s fine,” he said, glancing at her as he took the cup.

Her brown eyes were a little red and sad, sympathetic, but nothing more. “Thank you for telling me,” she said.

“You deserved to know,” he said with a shrug.

He drank some of the coffee, ate the other bagel. He hadn’t really thought she’d run to him with open arms because he’d told her something about his past. He hadn’t done it to manipulate her into taking him back, but because he owed her something, not just for walking out, but in recognition of what they’d shared.

He owed himself, too. Admitting the truth to a person he trusted took down the walls, but he didn’t care. Rather than exposed, vulnerable, he felt…okay. His dad was still in surgery and who knew what would happen with Lacey, but he felt the strange lightness that came every time he shed the twenty pounds of gear he wore on the job.

The hours passed, each marked by a phone call from a nurse in the OR, who gave him businesslike updates. Lacey stepped out to take a couple of phone calls, but for the most part she left her BlackBerry in her bag, sitting close enough to him that he could feel her shoulder against his with each even rise and fall of her breathing.

She kept her hands in her lap. He didn’t overstep his bounds. He no longer had the right to touch the woman who’d let him inside her body an hour after they’d met.

The last call came just before three. “The surgery went very well,” the nurse said.

“Your father will be in recovery for about an hour, then in the ICU for at least the next twenty-four hours. You can see him in about ninety minutes.” He flipped his phone closed and relayed the information to Lacey. “I’m so glad,” she said. “For you both.”

When Hunter was able to see his dad again, he was still unconscious. The surgeon talked to him about post-op recovery, follow-up visits, diet and exercise, drugs. As he expected, Lacey stayed by his side, listening quietly. He soaked up her presence while he could, storing up her calm composure, the scent of her perfume, the heat of her body so near to his, but never touching. Never quite touching him.

His dad woke up for a bit around nine. Hunter was there, holding his hand. “You did great, Dad. You’re going to be fine.”

A couple of blinks.

“I’m going to take Lacey home. She’s been with me all day. I can’t stay overnight in the ICU but I’ll be back tomorrow morning, as soon as they’ll let me in. Love you, Dad,” he said. Another, longer blink, then his father’s eyes closed again.

Lacey had her coat on when he left the room. He picked up her laptop bag and carried it to the car for her. She was quiet on the ride home, looking at traffic, neon signs, anything but him.

When he pulled into her driveway he didn’t bother to cut the engine. “Thanks for coming with me,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “I thought I’d make grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner. If you want to come in.”

She said the words carefully, as if she’d thought through all the implications and was trying to keep things as neutral as possible. It was very possible she was just being friendly. The women at work did things like that. Tough-as-nails cops made brownies or fudge or casseroles for friends who’d had a baby, lost a parent, been diagnosed with cancer. God, this was a good woman, but he was crazy to read anything other than friendship into a grilled cheese sandwich.

“Yeah,” he said and turned off the car. “I want to come in.” 175

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Chapter Nineteen

Inside the house Lacey shed layers in the foyer, Hunter maintaining a careful, polite distance behind her while she hung up her coat, draped her scarf over a hook in the closet. She'd bought the green pashmina from a street vendor in SoHo because it was the exact color of his eyes, and felt like a fool for doing it. He hadn't seemed to notice, though, nor did he comment on her unusually clumsy gestures. The scarf slipped to the floor twice before she finally wrapped it around the hanger.

"The fire's ready to light, if you don't mind," she offered, pointing at the long matches on the mantel. "I'm going change."

Without waiting for his response she hurried up the stairs, into her bedroom. Off came the suit and stockings. She washed and moisturized her face, then pulled on thick socks, warm fleece pants, a turtleneck and a heavy brown sweater that belted at her waist. They were clothes meant to ward off the November chill, not seduce the man waiting for her downstairs.

The man she thought would never enter her house again.

Astonishment was too tame a word to describe the complete absence of neural activity she felt when she flung open the door to find him on her front porch, a silent, looming figure in the pre-dawn blackness. It had taken a minute for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, to see the hollow, red eyes, the grooves bracketing his mouth, the tension in his shoulders.

A savvier woman would have stifled the automatic *What happened?* in her throat. A woman with better self-protective instincts would have let him go, even after he told her. But utter devastation brought him back to her door. She didn't have it in her to leave him to suffer alone.

Be careful, she warned herself when she made the abrupt decision to go with him.

As the hours passed at the hospital her heart stopped leaping every time the heat of his body seeped through his clothes to lay against her skin, or smelled the blend of soap and musk unique to him.

But now he was back in her house, after a day that would have rocked the most emotionally attuned person, let alone a man who walled off his feelings in an impenetrable fortress.

Be careful. He's just hungry. Maybe grateful. Perhaps comfortable here. Nothing more.

Back downstairs she found Hunter at the head of the kitchen table, the room illuminated only by the light from the fire burning in the fireplace. Respecting his preference for darkness, she turned on the light over the stove to work by.

He watched in silence as she pushed her sleeves to her elbows and took bread and Jarlsberg from the fridge, tomatoes from a bowl on the counter and her big cast iron pan from the bottom drawer. She oiled the pan and turned the heat to medium so it would warm while she shredded the cheese.

"Why did you let me come in, Lacey?" His husky voice rolled into the shadowy corners of her kitchen.

She could have told him so many different half-truths, but his question deserved an honest answer. "I wasn't going to," she replied as she spread butter on thick slices of bread. "This morning I told myself I could go to the hospital with you and that was it. I could give you the support you needed, but protect myself. Then you told me about Cecilia…your mother."

His head snapped up. "Don't pity me. That's not why I told you." This man, this stubborn, difficult, defensive, *amazing* man. "I don't pity you," she began as she reached for a tomato.

"I told you because I love you."

The rest of her explanation died in her throat. He'd shifted in his chair so he faced her, his elbows braced on his knees, his hands clasped, his eyes focused on her without flinching or apology and oh, this wasn't fair. He was supposed to eat the grilled cheese and go. Maybe call her in a day or two, just to see how she was doing. Give her time to process what he told her about Cecelia Hunter Bronson. But with his words fading into the pop and crack of the fire, she had to stop slicing the tomatoes because her hands were shaking, creating uneven slices.

She set down the knife and turned to face him, her fingers slowly curling around the edge of the counter. "You love me."

"Yeah," he said, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. "I have since the last night we were together. I just didn't know what the feeling meant. I love my dad, but I've never loved anyone else, so I didn't know." He looked at the floor, his dark head disappearing into the strong line of his back, then back at her. "But actions speak louder than words, so me loving you doesn't change anything, just like telling you about my mother doesn't make up for what I did. But…can I call you sometime? Take you to dinner, or just for coffee?"

Oh God, oh God, this was not *fair*. It was too fast, too soon. She didn't have a strategy for telling him what he had to know, but she'd been foolish to expect anything less than a forthright, direct approach from Hunter.

Therefore, he deserved nothing less from her. "You may not want to take me to dinner," she said her voice so soft she was surprised he heard her in the echoing kitchen.

"Why wouldn't I…?" The words faded. He cursed softly, looked toward the door to the deck then sat back in the chair, retreating into the shadows.

Explain, explain, I can explain! "I went to New York for a long weekend. I was in Midtown, talking to Claire on the phone. This man, an investment banker overheard me 177

talking about you. About us. How it was over. He bought me a drink and we talked, and then he invited me to dinner. I asked him…if he wanted to come up while I changed…"

His face, she thought. *His face*. The skin and muscles were immobile in the merrily dancing firelight, as if he'd never smiled, never thought of smiling.

"I thought you were gone," she said, a little louder, an effort to combat the darkness all around her. "I thought you'd never come back. We got to the door to my room and…and…he kissed me. I didn't feel what I felt when you kiss me. That rush. That ache. But he was there and nice and just…perfect. I was hurt. Angry. Certain you were gone forever."

She toyed with the dangling ends of the belt on her sweater. "I was going to sleep with him. I was. But I couldn't. I told him I'd made a mistake and I was so sorry, but I couldn't let him in. He was very sweet, said he'd wait in the lobby and take me to dinner anyway because I seemed sad. I said it wouldn't be fair for either of us. He left. I had room service," she added, nonsensically. As if Hunter cared about a quesadilla and a wedge of dry chocolate cake.

For an eternity the pan popped behind her and she stared at him, his face angles and planes in the shadows just beyond the reach of the light. Then he stood, took four slow, careful steps toward her, his boots thudding against her floor. He stopped so close he could have braced his arms on either side of her body.

But he didn't.

"Why didn't you sleep with him?" His distant, unemotional voice hummed with that bite, that command that made her want to answer. "I'm not perfect for you, but you slept with me."

"I didn't want perfect. I wanted you. I *want* you. We're not a pair of well-matched horses, but we're real." Fingers still gripping the granite counter, she looked up into his eyes as he towered over her. "The heart wants what it wants. Mine wants you." This declaration

must not have impressed him because his expression didn't change. "I wasn't the first man to kiss you."

"No." They'd shared many firsts, but that one was off the table from the beginning.

"Now I'm not the last, either."

What was he thinking? Could he not understand?

And how would you feel, Lacey my dear, if he told you another woman had taken your place in his bed?

"No," she said again. Done was done and couldn't be undone. If this mattered so much to him, she'd have to pick up the pieces and move on. Again.

He reached out and ran his thumb over her lips as if testing for the residue of another man's mouth, then laid his long fingers along her jaw, a touch so light and gentle she might well have imagined it but for the sparks firing in its wake. When he 178

slid his fingers under the hair at the nape of her neck, still careful, still watching her face, her heart flip-flopped in her chest.

Then he bent his head and brushed his lips over hers.

She stiffened, shocking electricity arcing through her body at the whisper-light sensation. Yes, oh yes. This was how it was supposed to be. A faint sound escaped her throat into the sliver of air between their mouths. His fingers tightened on her nape and like a gasoline-fueled fire, the heat combusted between them. He stepped into her body, pinning her against the counter as his tongue stroked over hers and his other hand came up to cup her cheek and hold her for his mouth.

He wasn't seducing. He wasn't asking permission. This was pure possession, a territorially staking his claim as the last man she'd ever kiss.

When he pulled back she found she was gripping not the counter's edge but the hard ridge of muscles along his spine. Her heart skittering crazily in her chest, she looked up into his bottomless green eyes and saw profound satisfaction and telling relief.

"A kiss. Jesus, Lacey. My life flashed in front of my eyes and all you did was kiss him?"

He was shaking with laughter as he leaned into her, his long fingers combing through her hair.

She pushed against his broad chest. "It may sound like nothing to you," she said indignantly, "but I felt like I was cheating on you."

"Why? I walked out."

"Because," she said with a business-like shove , "I love you!" That stopped him. He pulled back but trapped her hands against his chest as he looked at her and suddenly the intense man she remembered was back. "What?"

"I love you. I did then and I do now. When I kissed him I felt like I'd betrayed you and myself. It was terrible."

One corner of his mouth lifted as he huffed out an amazed breath. "You're pretty loyal, beautiful."

The endearment, rasped out in his husky voice, made her tip her head forward to rest on his chest. "I am," she said.

He looked at the pan, the oill gleaming on the rough black surface, at the cheese and buttered bread. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," she said frankly. "Why?"

"Because," he said as his lips skittered hot and persuasive along her jaw, "I want to take you to bed. Make love with you. Now."

"Oh," she said as her spine melted under his slow, persistent assault on the sensitive skin of her neck.

"I'll feed you in…let's call it an hour," he murmured. A nip to her earlobe, his tongue tracing the edge of her ear while his big, warm hand cupped her jaw to hold her still when she shivered, then he said, "I'll cook. You won't have to do a thing." As if she could resist the seduction in his words, the memories conjured up by the slow, teasing grind of his erection against her hip. "Deal," she said.

With a flick of his wrist he turned off the heat under the pan. She started for the door but he caught her, held her to him as he backed her through the living room and up the stairs. He seemed both reluctant to let her more than an inch away from him and desperate to get her clothes off. She lost the sweater in a heated kissing match just outside the kitchen door. Behind her as they negotiated the stairs, he still managed to strip off her turtleneck half way up.

"Turn around."

Poised one step above him, the height difference brought her head almost level with his, so she was able to trail the pads of her fingers along his rough jaw as he stared at her forest green satin bra.

"I missed you in your sexy underwear," he said as he brushed his thumbs over her nipples.

Goosebumps rippled up her arms and her mouth went dry. "It's not that sexy," she demurred as she tugged off his shirt. Compared to thongs and push-up bras, her bikini briefs and demi-cup barely qualified as sensual. He, however, took her breath away, hard and broad, the muscles bunching and flexing under his skin.

He dropped to his knees on the riser below her and shot her a look full of dark desire as he tugged her fleece pants down. "Looking at you in your suit, knowing there's something so pretty underneath, makes me want to undo all those buttons and get you out of your clothes, just to see what you've got on." The heated words and the sure, warm touch of his hands along the curve of her bottom made her sit down, hard, on the cabbage rose runner. "I stocked up in New York," she whispered.

“Good,” he murmured against her breast. In the living room below them the fire crackled and danced, casting long shadows up the stairs as he reached around to deftly unfasten her bra and pull it off. She lay back on her elbows, her hair falling behind her as she watched him reach for the elastic edge of her panties and pull them down.

“Right here on the stairs?” she gasped when he urged her to lift so he could pull off her panties.

His hands smoothed up her inner legs, parting them as he went. He leaned forward and kissed the soft skin below her ribs. “Right here on the stairs,” he confirmed.

The heat of his mouth against her inner thigh made her gasp, a sound she made again when his stubble rasped against her needy flesh. He passed over it with a faint brush of his lips before laving her other thigh. Her hipbones. Her softly rounded belly.

Trembling, her legs splayed wide while he took his time, made her wait for the moment when his tongue touched her clit.

When the moment came she cried out and arched toward him. Each hard stroke of his tongue over the swollen nub tightened the coil of tension low in her belly, until she was drawn tight as a bow, quivering under his mouth, incoherent. All her senses drew in, focusing on the exquisite, tingling tightness between her legs, her hitching breaths, the fire now dancing behind her closed eyelids until time stopped and fierce pleasure pulsed through her.

She subsided, legs quivering as she relaxed into the hard wood of the risers. Then the world spun around as he slid his arms under her knees and shoulders, lifting her with ease. When the rumpled sheets of her unmade bed met her back, she opened her eyes to see him shove his jeans down and off, then came over her, his weight on his elbows as he urged her legs apart with his knees, unselfconsciously

making room for his body.

After a month apart she expected a fast rush to the finish, but he stretched out and smoothed her hair back from her face before reaching down to grip her hip. Adrift on waves of sensation she slid her hands up his damp, muscled back to grip his shoulders and find solid ground. Blunt and insistent, his shaft probed, found entrance to her body.

She watched unguarded emotion wash across his face as he sank into her. Wonder.

Pleasure. Need. Anticipation.

Love. Under it all, infusing every look, every action, every touch. Love.

Sensitized by the orgasm and need too long denied, his first thrust stroked over aching nerve endings and made her gasp. He paused, buried in her to the hilt as he stared down at her without blinking. She stared back, helplessly snared by the fierce pleasure and stark possession on his face. As he began to move she dug her fingernails into his shoulders, holding on as the pleasure grew to need, then agony. Thick and hard inside her, stretching her deliciously, each plunging stroke drove her closer and closer until she arched hard against his unyielding body and flew apart.

The harsh rasp of his breath in her ear brought her back to earth, desperate need simmering under the tense cadence of his strokes. He let out a gasp, his rhythm disintegrating as a month of deprivation took its toll. He thrust once more, deep and sure, then the agony etched into his face softened into satisfaction as he pulsed inside her.

Eventually he twisted onto his back, keeping her close against his side. She laid her hand on his breastbone and felt his heart rhythm slowly return to the normal, strong thuds. One foot rubbed lazily against his hard calf, the movement chafing her inner thigh against his hair-roughened leg.

There was nothing to say, in the best possible way.

Her stomach rumbled. He chuckled in response, then rolled out of bed and pulled on his jeans. She marked his progress by his pauses, one on the stairs to grab his t-shirt.

Another at the fireplace, judging by the thud and crackle of a log being thrown onto the fire. Then the kitchen door swung open.

She lay for a few minutes, savoring the pleasure ebbing sweetly from her body, the scent of him on her sheets. Pleasantly warm in bed, she snuggled in and considered dozing while he cooked, but the sheer thrill of having him back drove her out of bed and into the hallway. He'd tossed her underwear, turtleneck and pants to the top of the stairs. She plucked her sweater from the floor and tugged it on, belting it around her waist as she pushed open the door to the kitchen.

Hunter stood in front of the stove, a tea towel thrown casually over his shoulder.

He'd turned on the lights and tuned her under-the-cabinet radio to an alternative rock station, a male vocalist throatily entreating the listener to let love in. For a moment she watched him hum along, squaring up the edges of the sandwiches in the skillet as he did. He looked up and smiled his rare, wide smile, then lifted his arm, inviting her into his embrace.

Without hesitation she went to him, letting the kitchen door swing closed behind her.

The End

About the Author

After doing time at Fortune 500 companies on both coasts, I found myself living in the suburbs of a small Midwestern city. The glamour of various cube farm jobs had worn off, so I gave up making a decent living to take Joseph Campbell's advice and follow my bliss: writing romance.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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